

"THY WILL BE DONE"

March 11, 1990

TEXT: Mark: 14:36 "And he said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will but what thou wilt.'"

What does it mean to be Christian? How is a Christian different from anyone else? Is there any difference, or are we all pretty much the same? If we are not Jews, or Muslims, or something else, does that mean we are automatically Christian? If we join a church, does that make us Christian, or is there more to it than that? These are vital questions, especially on this New Member Sunday.

This morning twenty-three men and women stand before us, expressing their desire to be a part of this church, wanting to share in our fellowship and to help in our work. And we, who are members already, stood with them to renew our covenant with God and with each other. We said, "Now we, members of this church, on behalf of the church universal, welcome you into our fellowship. Your peace and welfare are our own. With you we renew our pledge to God and this church." But what does that mean? It all sounds very nice, but what is it that we are pledging ourselves to do?

Our Covenant speaks of joining together "followers of Jesus Christ for the object of worshiping God and of making his will dominant in the lives of men." Those are nice words, too, but what do they mean? How do we worship God? What is His will? And what does it mean to be "followers of Jesus Christ"? What separates "followers" from those who are just admirers? There may be many answers to those questions. But the best one I can think of is in I John, chapter two, verse six, where we read: "He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked."

Now, certainly that does not mean we all have to dress the way that Jesus dressed, or talk the way that Jesus talked, or leave our homes to become itinerant preachers. You and I live in a very different kind of world, a very different culture. There are bound to be many ways in which our lives are different from his. But, if we are to be his followers, there must be some way in which we are the same, some way in which we follow him. It is not just saying that we are Christian. Jesus, himself, said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven." [Matthew 7:21]

With that in mind, let us look again at this morning's scripture and that crucial time in Jesus' life, when he wrestled alone in prayer in the darkness of Gethsemane. Crucial because he still had a chance to change the future. He still had time to get away, to go back to Galilee where he would be safe.

And crucial, too, because there in the garden he seems to have realized, for the first time, what really lay ahead of him. I can appreciate that because I remember such a time in my own life. It was the first time I ever had surgery. Or at least the first time I had anything to say about it. When I was four, I had had my tonsils out, but that was something that was done to me. And I was not very gracious about it. As I recall, I fought and kicked so hard that a nurse and two interns had to hold me down while the ether took effect. And we will not even talk about what I did when I came to again.

But this time was different. I was twenty-two years old, and the whole thing was up to me. I was scheduled for surgery on my knee, and I had thought about it for some time. I knew what they were going to do, and I knew it needed to be done. But, as they rolled my stretcher into the elevator on the way to the operating room, the reality of it struck me in a whole new way.

I think it may have been that way with Jesus. Mark's Gospel tells us he "began to be greatly distressed and troubled." In Greek, both of those terms convey a feeling of utter surprise and amazement. And his human nature recoiled from what he saw. He told his disciples, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death. And, like me, there was a part of him which wanted to change his mind. So he prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, remove this cup from me."

We can not be sure exactly why he felt that way. Perhaps it was a fear of dying. It is one thing to talk about death; it is quite another to look it squarely in the eye. Perhaps it was some doubt about the purpose of it all. One of his disciples had already betrayed him. The others were quarrelling over who would be first when he came into his Kingdom. Perhaps knowing that his closest friends understood so little of what he was doing made him wonder how his death would accomplish anything. Perhaps he thought, "Would it not be better for me to stay alive, to continue my ministry?" Whatever it was, he wanted to avoid what lay ahead.

But he also trusted God. Mark tells us his prayer began with the word, "Abba", which means more than Father. Like our word "Daddy", it signifies a closeness and trust, not just respect and obedience. The worst thing about his situation may have been its ambivalence. He wanted to do God's will, but he could not see what it would accomplish. What God was asking did not seem to make any sense. Would it not be better to go on preaching and healing. And, in that confusion, he was tempted. Tempted to follow his own wisdom instead of God's.

What a difference that would have made. It would have changed the whole course of history. If he had gone back to Galilee, he would have become just another Rabbi. What he said and did might well have been forgotten. His power was not in his words, but from His crucifixion and resurrection. If he had followed his own wisdom, perhaps we would still be wondering what God is really like, wondering whether He really cares. How grateful we can be that he followed God's will, not his own.

Still we understand his temptation. We understand because -- sooner or later-- we all find ourselves in much the same boat. Like him, we, too, face times of decision, and, like him, often face them alone. When such times come, we, too, are tempted to follow our own wisdom, our own will. Like him, we may not understand what good obedience will do. Like him, we too may pray, "Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me." But will we also add, "Yet not my will but thine be done"?

That, you see, is the point where we either follow or fall away. And it can sometimes involve real sacrifice. I am not completely naive. I know there are employers who may require those who work for them to do things that are shady, perhaps even illegal. If you do not go along, you may lose your job. But if you do, you can lose something even more precious. Something deep inside.

Most of the time, however, the choices we face are smaller ones. It may be just a question of going along with the gang. Or passing on some juicy bit of gossip. Or not reporting everything when we make out our income tax return. It can even be as small as using company stamps on personal letters or taking home a few pencils or paper clips.

We may say to ourselves, "Everyone is doing it, what difference can a few paper clips make?" But it does make a difference. When you multiply such acts by millions of workers, the cost can be enormous. But the greatest cost is always to ourselves. Even if no one else knows, we know. And it makes a difference in us.

The world is full of choices --some can be so hard that they seem to overwhelm us and some so petty that we are tempted to pass over them. But those decisions are the things that divide the followers of Christ from those who just admire him. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." In our times of decision, God grant that we, like Jesus, may choose God's way.