

HIS WILL IS OUR PEACE

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THE Benedictine maxim *Pax inter spinas*—Peace among thorns—is applicable to everyone who is trying to live the life of the spirit, but whereas the peace is supernatural and due to the indwelling of God in our souls, the thorns chafe the unspiritual parts of us, and because they are painful or irritating we are often more conscious of pricks than of peace. Our Lord warned us that following him entails many things which are hard to nature, but he also said that if we took up his yoke we would find rest to our souls, and the over-all pattern of the spiritual life as depicted in the New Testament is undoubtedly one of eager service and of joy. It could not well be otherwise, for the following of Christ is nothing less than the doing of God's will, and all our true happiness is grounded in union with him. The working out of this destiny is our most important occupation. It should also be our happiest occupation, for his will is our peace and the more fully and generously we co-operate with his designs, the more fully will spiritual joy infuse our souls: gloom and dejection are never the work of the Holy Ghost. In everyday affairs we all realize that nothing worth-while is achieved without effort and that, though our natural gifts and inclinations will lead us along those paths which God sees are best suited to our service of him, we still need training or practice to become proficient in them. No one person can become adept in all branches of knowledge and handicraft; nor does God expect it, but there is one science it is our paramount duty and privilege to master. It is the science of holiness.

We have, on the average, very academic and misleading ideas of what sanctity means and many of those ideas are unattractive. Pietistic lives of saints which lay undue emphasis on dehumanized personalities and phenomena, and the somewhat daunting descriptions of the spiritual life in the mystical classics and some modern books, tend to set holiness apart from everyday life and to persuade us that we, being very ordinary mortals, must not aspire too high. Such reading may, indeed, disastrously sap our courage; for if we see the spiritual life stretching ahead in

terms of desolation, unceasing struggle and grim endurance we shall hardly find heart to take the first step. But we must learn to walk before we can run and to do God's will in small things before attempting the greater, and maybe if we tormented ourselves less over detachment from creatures, forced acts of the will, dark nights, acquired and infused contemplation and all those other technical terms and descriptions which make the spiritual life sound so complicated and alarming, the emptied spaces of our minds would be filled with the personal inspirations of the Holy Ghost, who alone can tell us how best to love and serve God. We may find it difficult to believe, but the hallmark of the spiritual life is holy simplicity. It can be summed up in six words: 'Thy will, not mine, be done'.

In theory it may require arduous training to submit our wills to God, and the difficulties attendant on this life-long occupation can sound very discouraging, but our business is with the present moment, not with the future, and it is only when we try to look too far ahead that our imaginations outrun our courage. We must remember too that almost all the great spiritual guides wrote for religious, men and women whose lives were deliberately ordered to allow for the greatest possible union with God and whose circumstances were very different from our own. The tempo of life itself was slower in those times, and few people living in the world (or even in religious houses) today can hope to emulate the long devotional and ascetic practices recommended by the mediaeval writers. True, it is essential to realize that certain dispositions and practices are necessary; there must be at least the desire to love God and the willingness to discard whatever hinders our approach to him; but we must learn to live in the present, giving him as gladly as possible what he asks for here and now, day by day, and avoiding all anxiety about the future. His will is our peace and, conversely, our peace lies in doing his will. Everyone who sincerely tries to live by the spirit endeavours to do God's will at all times, but we feel we cannot always see clearly what it is, and there are long hours in each day when we are occupied in earning a living or in attending to duties which seem to separate us from him. We are too inclined to associate the spiritual life with prayer and devotional reading and an earnest endeavour to improve; we fret because we cannot give more time to it and do not make obvious

and more rapid progress; we perturb ourselves by imagining trials that lie ahead or which may never come to pass, and we invent ways of pleasing our Lord while overlooking the very opportunities he gives us for doing so. All this gives rise to anxiety and restlessness, those twin hindrances to the spiritual life, and when anxiety and restlessness enter the soul they form a barrier against that peace which our Lord promised to give us. We cannot be responsive to his gentle touch if we hold our souls in a state of tension. 'The best work is done by minds at peace in a tranquillity of order. Where all is a sign of interrogation, if not of contradiction, there can be nothing settled, and where there is nothing settled we have neither the time nor the energy nor the disposition to create; there is a wound in the spirit, a sensitive sore, which prevents the mind from going about its proper business' (Martin D'Arcy, s.J., *Nature of Belief*).

The proper business of the mind is to know truth, and in this particular matter we cannot do better than lay up in our minds the many, many scriptural passages which assure us that God's will is our peace: they will do much to stabilize us, and also to give us some adequate conception of his omnipotence. He deigns to call himself our Father and elder brother and friend, but he is also infinite in all perfections and the greater and more wonderful and more beautiful we apprehend him to be, the more we realize our utter dependence on him, the more absolute trust we place in him. We are made to know truth and to love goodness and nothing less than supreme truth and goodness, which is God, can satisfy the innate craving of our souls.

Our Lord, as we read time and again in the gospel, was content to take people as he found them and to lead them on, and the fact that we stand low in the spiritual life at present is no excuse for inertia. We may be very sure that the least desire to do his will at all times will call down upon our heads the grace necessary to do so. The first step is proverbially the hardest, but once we realize that we need to show more generosity towards him, we can find unlimited opportunities for committing everything into his hands; the first step in the spiritual life is that of learning, or even of wanting to learn, to make God the centre of our lives. Not only the first step, but every successive step, for even if we become great saints the whole process of our sanctification will lie precisely in

loving our Lord, God, more than ourselves. Most of us are only too well aware of our mediocrity, and though we deplore it, we find it exceptionally difficult to get out of the rut we have worn for ourselves. The rut itself may be the result of earlier fervour; we formed good habits of prayer and have kept them up, we set out to master our passions and seldom fall into grave or even deliberate venial sin. We cannot whole-heartedly accuse ourselves of tepidity, for that means self-satisfaction, and our trouble lies in knowing we fall woefully short in our service of God. It is not so much that we are reluctant to serve him (indeed there may be nothing we desire more) but opportunities seem lacking. Hope that is deferred afflicts the soul, and our apparent inability to do anything worth-while for God breeds discouragement, which in turn gives rise to restlessness and anxiety and pre-occupation with ourselves. And if we are pre-occupied with ourselves, we cannot be attentive to God.

Still, this difficulty is very real and we all suffer from it at one time or another. One day follows another, all set in much the same pattern, work and leisure, petty vexations and small pleasures, the scanty triumphs grace has won and our innumerable failures to co-operate with it. True, when our Lord makes us like himself, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, or heaps a treasure of joy upon our heads we are responsive; here, indeed, is something to lift us out of ourselves and, whether under a crushing load of sorrow or on the crest of a wave of joyful gratitude, we are different people; no longer mediocre but alive. But sooner or later the undertow of everyday life drags us back and we find ourselves, if not in our original rut, at least in one very similar to it. We may think in all humility that when God manifests his will in unmistakable terms we rise to the occasion; but life cannot be an unending succession of crises, and it is the dead level of daily existence that saps our spiritual vitality. Yet it is the dead level of daily existence which offers us our best and ever-present means of advancement in his service. There is a widespread idea that our service of God is confined to recognizably religious matters. This, if true, would spell a bleak outlook for most of us. But the idea itself is mistaken. The essential interior act of religion is that of giving ourselves to God, not merely at certain times or in certain circumstances, but at every moment of every day.

We are all ruled by his loving providence and we on our side must lovingly co-operate with his plans and, seeing his will in all things, great and small, must learn unselfishly to prefer it to our own, not in any drab spirit of resignation or self-abnegation, but as a continuous act of generosity. For love always wants to *give*. Shakespeare's words are true of the spiritual as well as of the temporal life: 'A merry heart goes all the way, but a sad one tires a mile-a'. God loves a cheerful giver, and it is by asking the Holy Ghost to increase his gifts of supernatural peace and joy in our souls that we shall best be enabled to serve him with a cheerful countenance. It is idle to pretend we can always serve God with felt joy. Only too often our duties are repugnant and dispiriting; we have our ups and downs of health and spirits, but even so it is essential to realize that it is in these very circumstances that God reveals his will to us at the present moment. Many of our discouragements arise from taking a too restricted view of serving him; we think there is something definitely religious in laying aside a book in order to give food and drink to a beggar, but if our own hungry and thirsty children interrupt our reading it is nothing more than a common and irritating item of domestic life. Again, we feel we are working for God if we instruct a convert in the use of the rosary, but we do not consider it a similar spiritual work of mercy to teach the same thing to our own children. That, of course, is merely part of the daily round and common task. But given the simple intention of doing God's will at all times, everything we offer him is valuable in his sight, everything furthers our union with him. There may not be anything noticeably spiritual in washing up dishes or driving a lorry or watching a football match, but it is all part of God's fore-ordained plan and we cannot reflect too often or too vividly that everything is ordered for our good and his greater glory.

It is a human impossibility to think of God all day long. But when we are doing something for a person who is very dear to us, love-in-action informs the occupation. There may be no conscious thought of the person for whom we are doing it, but at the back of our minds there is an inchoate, abiding awareness 'this is for her' (or for him). What is done with love is usually done well; we put our hearts into it, we take pains and, regretful that our handiwork is less perfect than we would wish, we yet have confidence that our friend will accept it as the expression of our love;

the best we could offer. No doubt saints and other advanced souls spend their whole lives in a similar state of love-in-action towards our Lord, and we lesser mortals can at least endeavour to make our lives, humdrum and disappointing and unworthy as they may seem, a perpetual gift to God. We indeed have much to deplore, but our Lord knows that we are only tyros and will look at the intention rather than at the finished product and in his own way perfect our feeble efforts. We have only the present moment to give him: the past is already in his hands, with or without our willing co-operation, and the future is not yet ours to give him: each fleeting moment reveals his will for us and we have only to do what we believe he requires of us to live in complete union with him. Here and now we have what God in his inscrutable wisdom knows is best for us; it may indeed require high courage and generosity to trust him when we cannot fathom his designs, but it is just this exercise of fortitude and unselfishness which is implicit in our daily prayer, 'Thy will be done'. We must be on the alert, we must ask for guidance; faced with alternative courses of action we must choose which seems best and then, if we find after all that we have made a mistake, we must try to understand that the mistake itself formed part of God's plan for leading us to him. In the strict sense of the words nothing can ever go wrong, for everything that does in fact happen is part of God's over-ruling providence. We have free-will, yes; we can choose good or evil, but in some unfathomable way God's will rules over all creation and even our sins are used by him to bring good out of evil. Our finite minds cannot grasp this great mystery of religion, but it should surely afford us wonderful comfort and security and a sense of marvelling awe to reflect that everything we do accords with God's will towards us. 'We can choose what we want and within limits what we shall do, but we cannot choose the consequences of what we do, nor can we prevent any action of ours—even our rebellion—from being used by God to his glory; we can only prevent it from being used to our glory too' (Sheed, *Theology and Saints*, p. 124).

Every moment of every day we are making this choice, and if we commit ourselves into his hands, refer our lives to him, do what we believe to be right at all times, we have no cause for worry. We can forget ourselves and live for and in him, peacefully and joyously. 'There is nothing so simple as the spiritual life', wrote

Abbot Chapman to one of his correspondents. 'It has no difficulties, no troubles—these are in the lower, unspiritual part of us. You belong to God. Let that union be your real life . . . have confidence in it. It is God's work, not yours, so don't interfere with it or look at it more than you can help. . . . Abandonment to divine providence, humility, charity, these are virtues: anxieties, self-dissections, wondering what God means, wanting to know if we are progressing, these are very nearly vices. God . . . is bringing you to himself in his own way, not yours' (G. Chapman, *Spiritual Letters*, p. 178). It can all be summed up in that lovely psalm-verse, 'Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.' The words at first reading may hide their true significance, for we are too accustomed to powerful street lighting, blinding car headlights and broad highways to appreciate the restricted rays of a primitive lamp shining on a rough track. That did, quite literally, show the traveller where to put first one foot and then the other. There was no possibility of his seeing what lay ahead, for that was shrouded in darkness; all his faculties were intent on proceeding step by step in the little pool of light which guided his steps and which alone prevented him from losing his way—and perhaps his life too. Our Lord, the light of the world, will never leave us to walk in darkness if we faithfully follow him, but we must remember his reiterated counsel to live in the present moment, not taking undue thought for the morrow or allowing our hearts to be troubled with fear for the future; or yet disturbed by what belongs to the past. Our happiness lies within the little orbit of the light he sheds on our path from one moment to the next. If we are intent on this divine illumination, our hearts and minds will necessarily be occupied with him, not with ourselves: and, walking in his very footsteps, we shall learn to understand ever more fully that his will is indeed our peace; the peace he promised, which surpasseth all understanding and which is an everlasting peace.