

CHAPTER EIGHT

GOD DECIDES TO INTERVENE

One way to state the core of the content of our faith is in Augustine's words, "that the power to love will be given him when he asks for it . . ." This spells out the central role of the love-command and the gift of the Spirit in our spiritual life. In this chapter I will try to look at reality from God's side—what is it like for Him to be constantly pressing His gifts upon us? Some would consider any effort to look at reality from God's side futile because it will end up in anthropomorphisms. But Jesus, and the New Testament writers, in line with the prophets, are quite willing to take that path. Since the human is the most perfect image available to our experience, to avoid all anthropomorphisms usually leads to images of God taken from less perfect areas, a kind of mechanicomorphism. In prayer, by not letting God be so personal as to have a real, concrete desire to act upon me, I can find myself in the presence of a pleasant humming consolation, something like a Cola machine still lighted up in an empty store. Or the presence of God can become like a visit to a hospital bed. Your friend is there, bandaged from head to foot, with only a breathing hole. You are present to him, but you expect no input from him. You count on his hearing you and being cheered or resonating sympathetically, but he will do nothing more perceptible than be there and breathe. Is this the presence of the Living God?

Sometimes, were someone to ask us a few minutes after we left breakfast, "Who was that you were talking with?" we might not remember. It was all rather blah. But with certain other people, we can remember, even days later and even every word. God is not, according to the prophets, someone in whose presence you can fall asleep. No. He has too much on His mind. His desires are burning Him. What is it like to be in the presence of someone who has a great determination to transform you?

"Did you see Ellie's brother at the reception?"

"Well, I don't know, I did see some fellow that looked like her."

"You couldn't have seen him then. He had green hair!"

To get near him is to notice at once his green hair. To get anywhere near the presence of God is to feel His intense desires, and the active energy of this very determined person.

Sometimes New Testament translations conceal this aspect of God's reality. For example, the New English Bible's version of the beginning of Ephesians: "From Paul, Apostle of Christ Jesus, commissioned by the will of God, to God's people at Ephesus." In his commentary on Ephesians in the Anchor Bible, Markus Barth objects to the word "will." He urges the word "decision" instead.

"Decision" here means God's free volition; "will" might be misunderstood in the sense of a fixed plan or testament. Ephesians does not support the notion of an impersonal fate or cosmic blueprint that underlies historic events, or of an impersonal and unchangeable divine rule that determines all acts of human obedience. God's 'decision' describes an action and manifestation of the One who is living, personal, wise, and powerful. An event in God Himself is now revealed.

The gospel text can lose its vitality for us. We need to read it afresh in order to catch the flavor originally intended. Our faith is in a God so personal that our intellect is unhappy with it, a God who is willful, determined, active—not at all peacefully enthroned in sleepy self-containment. In a sense, His throne is

empty. He has been called from it to engage in a pursuit. His children are in great need. His presence is a hurrying wind. A shepherd in pursuit of a dear lost sheep is Christ's suggestion.

Later, in the same chapter, the New American Bible translates verse 9, "God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery . . .," and again Markus Barth urges a different word. He prefers the word "secret." A mystery is an event which, even after it is known, is not really known; but a secret is something which is not known but, once it is revealed, is then known.

In the course of discussing this, Barth spells out God's secret:

Before the creation in God's counsel, during the historic fulfillment of God's decision, and at the consummation of God's will Jesus includes in himself a great people.

This secret includes within it many mysteries, but it itself is far from being an unknowable mystery. "It is known by revelation and is to be made known all over the world."

This is the secret that is finally revealed to the saints: God loved them before the creation. He loves them despite their sins and death. He loves them with the intention that they praise his glory.

Man did not know this love; the powers did not. But God did. It was God's secret because it was hidden in his heart, identified with his own being, his whole self. Now it has been laid bare. The whole true God is no longer hidden and unknown. His very heart is opened.

When a lover confesses to his beloved his secret love, he does not reveal a method or technique. Rather he reveals himself; he opens his heart, and in so doing he delivers and gives himself to the beloved. The secret revealed is his innermost heart. He is essentially and totally for the other, and makes known that he never wants to be without or against the beloved.¹⁰

The Christian's life is centered on a spectacular image of God. God is personal and has entered history and can best be understood as having a history Himself. His choices have involved

Him in others' lives, as can be seen most clearly in Jesus. Because of His desire to befriend us, He has undergone ups and downs, successes and failures. And it is His choices that are at the bottom of any meaningfulness we can have in our lives. Meaningfulness, in other words, is a gift to us: we can accept it and we can reject it, but we cannot achieve it apart from His decisions. From now on our lives are going to be meaningful and remembered only in this: this person accepted God's decision; this one rejected it.

Our life, then, takes its meaning from the decision of another. Let us imagine a village in Russia hundreds of years ago. Great poverty is everywhere. No family is really well off. One man gets the inspiration: let us take advantage of every opportunity no matter how slight. He begins, in his spare time, to farm a small ribbon of marginal land. And his wife spends her spare time picking up small pieces of wool, gathering every bit she can, and then, as material collects, she knits a cap. Some neighbors are scornful. But a few are inspired, and they begin to work, too. As the months go by, with occasional failures, a slow advance is made. There's a little bit more money available. Some room for choice results. Of course, the five or six families involved are such a small minority in this village. Most try to ignore it; some laugh; a few scorn. All are envious.

Far off in St. Petersburg, the Czarevitch's birthday approaches. It is a special birthday, and the Czar decides on an especially large gift. He tells his son of it, and asks what he would want. The Czarevitch says, "Let's help the poor!" But the Czar warns him, "Even if we distributed the whole gift to the poor, it would mean little because they are so many." The Czarevitch suggests, "Let's give it all to one village!" "That would make a difference, a huge difference in their lives," says the Czar, "but which village?"

His son still loves his nursery maid, and he suggests the village where she was raised and which she sometimes mentions. So it is done.

Messengers are sent to inform the villagers: the first installment will be distributed Saturday morning to all heads of families. Now each member of the village is in a new situation: the energetic, the lazy, the envious, the responsible. It doesn't really matter any more. Their future is going to be based on a new decision: to accept the emperor's gift, or to reject it. But rejecting it will not mean that their life will go on as before. No, they will be marked as people who rejected the gift, and that refusal will characterize their future life.

Nor does hard work make it more likely that they will accept. The two are not related. When Jesus made his offer, some very hard workers rejected his gifts. Nor does laziness guarantee a rejection. It is a whole new world based on a new set of values, and the old set of values are rendered useless.

For a while, what the Czar was up to was a secret, known only to himself and his son. With the arrival of the messengers in the village, the secret is published, the good news. A palace-event is now revealed, and that event is going to make history. The villagers are finding out that their lives rotate around someone else's use of freedom, rather than their own use or misuse of it. All their meaningfulness now centers on how they relate to this act of another's choosing. Because God has chosen to relate to us in a totally new way, beyond our powers to imagine, the meaning of our life comes from a new base. Courageous efforts are no longer the central response, but faith and receptivity, expecting God to act and wanting His will to be done, being aware of our helplessness.

Going to hear the messengers, going to collect the first installment, these are decisions of the villagers; but they are very different from farming the marginal land. Now what counts are decisions that focus on the choice of the Czarevitch. The will of another person becomes the foundation of the villagers' lives. An event has taken place in God, and He has made a choice, a bold choice, and that choice of His has been revealed to us; and for the believer it is the meaning of his life. Every activity of the

believer flows from that choice of God. The believer is no longer purchasing anything by his efforts to do all he can. His efforts are given to him as gifts, but this will not occur if he does not become absorbed in this spectacular God who has made such a blessed choice.

In order to grasp the radical nature of the transformation of human life by God's entering it with His love, artists can help us. We hear the words of the gospel, but they can be without vitality for us because the images have been over-used and rendered trite. We no longer experience the shock of what is being said. Sometimes as the preacher preaches—if he also listens—he can be shocked at the spectacular nature of what he's saying.

In Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* we have an image that may help us to grasp the radical shift of meaning that the gospel brings. A creature named Salo from a much more advanced civilization on a distant galaxy happens to pass near our solar system on his way to deliver a message to another distant galaxy. His ship develops a mechanical difficulty: he lands on Titan, a moon of Saturn, and sends word home, to Tralfamadore, about the problem. It would take 150,000 earthling years for this message to reach his home galaxy, but he is much longer lived than humans and these thousands of years are to him as but minutes and hours.

He could watch the activities on Earth by means of a viewer on the dashpanel of his ship. The viewer was sufficiently powerful to let Salo follow the activities of Earthling ants, if he so wished.

It was through this viewer that he got his first reply from Tralfamadore. The reply was written on Earth in huge stones on a plain in what is now England. The ruins of the reply still stand, and are known as Stonehenge. The meaning of Stonehenge in Tralfamadorian, when viewed from above, is "Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed."

Stonehenge wasn't the only message old Salo had received.

There had been four others, all of them written on Earth.

The Great Wall of China means in Tralfamadorian, when viewed from above, "Be patient. We haven't forgotten about you."

The Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero meant: "We are doing the best we can."

The meaning of the Moscow Kremlin when it was first walled was: "You will be on your way before you know it."

The meaning of the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, is: "Pack up your things and be ready to leave on short notice."

How did it happen? Vonnegut explains, "the Tralfamadorians were able to make certain impulses from the Universal-Will-to-Become echo through the vaulted architecture of the universe with about three times the speed of light. And they were able to focus and modulate these impulses so as to influence creatures far, far away, and inspire them to serve Tralfamadorian ends."

Our human history has a meaning from outside, a meaning that is being offered to it, and it will have no meaning apart from a willingness to receive. We are serving another's purpose! Fortunately, the Other is holy, and all love. And He has chosen to bless us beyond our deserving. He has chosen to make available to us the whole of His riches, His whole self.

He does desire to send a message, too. But it is not meant for alien creatures only, but for Earthlings; and the message is the good news: God has chosen us in His Son. He does want to write His message on Earth, not in stones, but in people. He is, through his powerful will, making us love, making us into instruments of His love. He is forming a grouping of people in a way of relating to each other, that acts as a proclamation of the good news to those around them. There are people in our world so open to God's influence that they become formed into a proclamation of God's love for the world. Just as Jesus was the bearer of the message, so has He left behind peoples who embody His message.

Another's will dominates our world, and determines totally what meaning it has. It is a will of spectacular benevolence. He has chosen to love us. He has chosen not to turn His back on wayward Israel. He has chosen to love us despite our death-bringing sinfulness. Costly for Him will be that loving choice.

There is in the tradition an image of this decision-making of God where the angels urge God to take back His love. They warn Him of the cost He will be forced to pay, of the worthlessness of the objects of His love. They urge Him to start over with a new group, a new race.

Jesus images the Father's determination in the parable of the wedding banquet. "I want my banquet hall full." This is Jesus' sense of the Father's deep willfulness. He intends to get His way.

Even when evil finds a home in human hearts, He persists. In one of the parables Jesus has the servants ask the farmer, "Where did the weeds come from?" And, in a moment of awareness that the scene has been transformed by a will hostile to His own, the master answers, "An enemy has done this." God becomes aware of the active hostility of a part of His creation. When the servants suggest a quick solution—ripping up the weeds—the owner says no. He sees that to save all, another path, a much more costly one of separating, will take place. God sees the need for the death of Jesus. With this awareness, the Father meets Jesus in the agony. All will be lost if Jesus looks only to His rights and His privileges.

Jesus has an image when he pictures the Father as a vineyard owner, saying to those who doubt the excessive generosity of the decision He has made, "Friend, is your eye evil because I am good? Have I not the right to do what I please with what is mine?" He has chosen to respond to our neediness, not our unworthiness. His kindness impels us to the same way of behaving. He presses on us to love as He does, to forgive the unforgivable. The affection He has for our enemy can threaten us. We can try to ignore it. We can in praying to Him keep that part of His personality hidden. But it is His innermost self! It is alien to

us. It is a way of behaving that can frighten us. It will be possible only with a way of looking at the world so different from our common path.

CHAPTER NINE

A DAILY MINIMUM OF MENTAL PRAYER

One of the common effects of a retreat experience is a desire for a more intimate relationship with the Lord. The retreatant looks around for things to do that will preserve this new-found joy and even deepen it. And one of the most common decisions is to get really serious about the prayer life. Very often there is in the mind of one's imagination an obligation to a specific quantity of daily mental prayer. Commonly this is not a firm part of the retreatant's past year, and he will doubtless make sure it becomes a part of his life this coming year.

Recently, in a workshop on the retreat life, I began by writing up a case of such a retreatant. I assumed the retreatant coming to get advice on how much to put aside each day for mental prayer, and when to make it. Six of the fourteen people present suggested a minimum of forty-five minutes. Four others suggested a thirty-minute minimum. One suggested twenty minutes as a guideline. The most common suggestion on when to make it was the early morning. The late evening was suggested by a few. I think that these suggestions would be rather common or valid.

Let us look briefly at a suggestion made by St. John Chrysostom:

He who prays should not only offer long prayers, but should