

Sermon: Pentecost 21, Year C, 17 October 2010
Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:10 – 4:5; Luke 18:1-14

How do we know God's will? That, in various ways, is the question that this morning's readings deal with. But before we try to answer that question, let's ask some prior ones. Why do we want to know God's will? *Response, leading on to ...* Who is God to us? *Response. And then ...* Who are we to God?

Now, let's go back to our first question: "How do we know God's will?" *Response. Tie it to the readings.*

Jeremiah – relationship: "They will know me."

Psalm – God's Torah

NT – What have you been taught?

Gospel – Knowing oneself in the face of God.

Let's start with the psalm. It says that God's law, the Torah, enables us to live rightly, according to God's will. We read the word of God and we do what God wants of us. But how do we know what God wants of us? How do we understand what the bible says?

Well, we read it. That's OK, we can handle that. Or can we? How many of us actually read our bibles regularly? And if we don't, why don't we? Could it be because it's too hard?

Listen to this. I opened my bible at random, and this is what I read: "Long may he live! May gold of Sheba be given to him. May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all day long."

What does that mean? Who does it refer to? Where is Sheba, and what was so special about its gold? Why make prayers for him, whoever he may be, why invoke blessings for him? Who is speaking? Who are they speaking to?

Now, I'm not going to go into all the answers here. The passage is from Psalm 72, so you can check it if you like. The point I'm trying to make is that we have to make sense of the scriptures. Now, we can do that in all sorts of ways. And one way is to ask questions of the text, like I just did when I asked you who the passage was about, where Sheba was, and so on. When we ask questions, our minds are open to answers. It's a way of getting to know the meaning of a text.

Well, what if we don't know the answers? *Response.* We look them up! That's what bible dictionaries are for. For example, when I looked up Sheba, I found that the Queen of Sheba most probably came from a place in the SW Arabian peninsula. There was also a reference to her visit to Solomon, and that she gave him vast amounts of gold. And if we look back to the beginning of the psalm, we see that it is, indeed, about a king. So maybe Psalm 72 is about Solomon – or perhaps the writer wanted the king to be as famous as Solomon. Do you see how we are building up a picture of what the text is saying?

So we ask questions of the text. And we put the text in context. Look at what is around it – the lines that come before or after, the chapters that surround our chapter, what book it comes from, whether it's in the Old Testament or the New.

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How do we discover God's will? We read the bible. And how do we know what the bible means? We ask questions about the passage, and we look up the answers – in commentaries and dictionaries. We make it our own. The person who wrote Psalm 119 talked about knowing the law, the Torah but what he or she meant was living with the Torah – eating and sleeping it, living and breathing it, until it is a part of who we are, and shapes the way we respond to the world.

Well, what about the other readings? The writer of the second letter to Timothy says, "... continue in what you have learned and firmly believed ..." There's the same reverence for the scriptures: the bible is precious and it's a very valuable aid in our desire to discover God's will. And we make sense of it by following the rules which we were taught, the guidelines which our tradition gives us. In effect, we recognise that experience – the experience of the faith community over the ages – is part of our set of skills for the task of understanding God's will. It's very important to note that it's not just our experience but the shared experience of the church which we have to take into account. We come together not just as individuals but as a community – the body of Christ.

OK, so we read the scriptures, we make sense of them, we interpret them according to the understanding of our church, our scholars and our preachers. Is that it? Or is there more?
Response.

You guessed it – there is, indeed, more. What about what Jeremiah had to say? "I will put my law within them ... they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

"They shall all know me." God promises us this. In fact, that knowledge is already ours: through the bible, through revelation (which just means the way god shows Godself to us), and through Jesus. When we look at Jesus, when we understand that we are included in the relationship which he and God share, we see God with clearer eyes, we hear God's voice more distinctly.

And so we come to the Gospel, to Jesus' own stories about God. Jesus praises the tax collector, who knew himself, who "did not exalt himself" but was humble. He didn't try to make out that he was better than he was, and he recognised that, compared to God, he had a long way to go. And Jesus tells us that it was this person, not the one who was pleased with himself, puffed up with pride, on whom God smiled. So we are to know ourselves. Now, that's a big job – but we can do it. And knowing who we are, we also have to realise who we are to God.

The widow clearly knew who she was. She kept coming back to that judge, asking for justice, demanding that she be given what was hers by right. The bible tells us that God cares for widows and orphans. That's a shorthand way of saying that God cares for all those who don't have anyone else to care for them. Today, it might be street people and drug addicts. What's so exciting about this story is not that the woman won her court case but that she had the courage and the commitment to herself to keep trying, no matter what. Now, you could say that she was desperate but even so she didn't give up. She knew herself, and she acted as if she mattered. And she did – to God. And so do we. We seek God's will, and we live in response to that will, which is love. Thanks be to God!