

World Youth Day came to an end in Sydney, Australia, this past week, and for the closing mass Pope Benedict attracted half a million people. In his message to pilgrims from around the world, he included these thoughts: “Many young people view their lives with apprehension and raise many questions about their future. They anxiously ask: How can we fit into a world marked by so many grave injustices and so much suffering? How should we react to the selfishness and violence that sometimes seem to prevail? How can we give full meaning to life?” These questions are natural among the young, but they never completely leave older people either. Why did God make me? What is the purpose of my life? What does God expect of me?

Saint Paul addresses this in his letter to the Romans. In his view, God has a big plan for all of creation, yet God is interested in individual people. God created each of us for some purpose, and we are happiest when we fulfill it. Here’s what Paul wrote: “All things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined; . . . and those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified.”

The word “predestination” is used by some Christians to mean that God has predetermined your salvation. Some people think there’s no point trying to live a better life because, “if I’m doomed, I’m doomed.” But Saint Paul probably means something more general – that God has a predestined plan in mind for each of us, but it requires our cooperation. As we give it, we are called, justified, and glorified.

Good Christians try to discern what God wants of us. We do it with the big questions – whom should I marry? Is God calling me to religious life? What employment should I seek that will bring happiness to me and benefit to the world? And we discern God’s will with smaller decisions: How shall I spend my day? Who relies on me today? Which of the choices facing me today is the one that will please God the most?

Sadly, we make some choices based on low principles – what will give me pleasure, or what is easier to do. But God expects something more. God created us for this time and place, with particular abilities and opportunities. We show our love for God when we accept what God made us to be. When we do, no matter how difficult the task, or how painful the suffering, all things will work together for good.

Pope Benedict told the pilgrims of World Youth Day, “Be prepared to put your life on the line in order to enlighten the world with the truth of Christ; to respond with love to hatred and disregard for life; to proclaim the hope of the risen Christ in every corner of the earth.” Christians can have a profound effect on the lives of individuals and in the course of world events if we seek out what is God’s purpose for our lives, and if we strive to live it faithfully each day.