

"It's God's will." That's a piece of religious philosophy we sometimes give and sometimes hear. It often comes up when things are most bleak and people have no other explanation. Usually you don't hear it when there's good news: the birth of a child, paying off the car, dining out with friends -- nobody says on those occasions, "Well, it's God's will." In the popular mind, God only wills bad news. The loss of a job, the end of a relationship, the death of a child. When we've done all we can do, when we're not responsible for the terrible conditions we find ourselves in, people try to cheer us up with this well-intentioned expression, "It's God's will." If we're the injured party, it usually doesn't make us feel any better, and I can't imagine it makes God feel any better. It makes other people feel better, because it gives them something to say. They're trying to make sense out of life too, so they rely on this unanswerable piece of folk wisdom. But it often doesn't help.

In fact, sometimes, it makes people hurt all the more. They wonder, "How can it be God's will that I suffer this pain? How can it be God's will that that life was lost?" These good questions reveal that people cannot reconcile their belief in a good God with the real experience of pain and loss.

Today we begin hearing from the Letter to the Ephesians. It will serve as our second reading every weekend for seven weeks. It's a beautiful book. Scholars think it was written by a disciple of Paul as a circular letter to several churches in Asia Minor, a kind of encyclical, to share some basic beliefs about God and the church.

The letter opens with the beautiful hymn of blessing that we hear today. It expresses the praise that we owe God. The theme of this praise, and one of the main themes of the whole letter, is that God has a plan. The writer says, "In all wisdom and insight, God has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth." The writer proposes that God had a secret plan for the salvation of the world, a plan formulated in all wisdom and insight, and one that God revealed in Christ. God does indeed have a will, and that will is good. The will of God is the union of heaven and earth. In the letter to the Ephesians, the new Christian community is reminded that they have begun a journey which will culminate in union with Christ. That is the will of God; everything else helps bring that will about.

One reason people facing loss question God's goodness is that they confuse the present tragedy with the ultimate plan. They wonder if the tragedy is God's will and forget that God wills our ultimate union with Christ. Saying "It's God's will" to people probably won't help them much. It's usually better to say, "I'm sorry." Or, "I can't imagine how that hurts," or more to the point, "I believe that God still loves and guides you through this difficulty." Tragedy is not God's will. Life is God's will. Happiness is God's will. We may wait a long time for it, but the plan of God will be achieved in wonder and blessedness.