

## Havant 2019 0217 Third Sunday before Lent (Yr C)

One of my grandchildren has the irritating habit of proclaiming on almost every available opportunity, *"It wasn't my fault"* or *"I couldn't help it."* He, for it is a he, is not unique. The other grandchildren, girls as well as boys, and for that matter almost everybody I know, adult and child alike, has some similar way of trying to avoid responsibility. *"It wasn't my fault! I couldn't help it."*

What a challenge then all those biblical passages where we are told pretty directly how we should behave. Remember how Jesus himself said, *Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful* and what he said to the rich man who him what he had to do to be saved; Jesus first reply was uncompromising, *You know the commandments*. It sounds as if our task is simply to do what we know to be right. The laws of nature, the teaching of the Church and our own consciences give us all the guidance we need how to behave, if we want to. It seems that the proper response to the plea *I couldn't help it* is the pantomime favourite *Oh, yes, you could*.

And yet, like most easy answers to difficult life questions, this misses out a vital bit of human experience. Although we like to believe we are free to behave as we should, is it really that simple? Especially if, as Jeremiah put it: *"the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse."*

This morning's collect might help us think through this dilemma. Let me remind you of how it started:

*Almighty God,  
who alone can bring order  
to the unruly wills and passions of sinful humanity:  
give your people grace  
.. to love what you command  
and to desire what you promise*

The prayer began by saying that our human wills and affections are disordered in such a way that only God can sort them out. It's not just that we don't do what we should. It's also that left to ourselves we are inclined to want and love the wrong things. We need God's help to love what God commands and to desire what God promises.

More than once over the years, this has provoked quite a storm in the church.

What has troubled some Christians are the words *"give your people grace to love what you command and to desire what you promise."*

God, the argument goes, has already told us how to behave and what to hope for. All we have to do is do it. As the proverb goes, God is always ready to help those who help themselves. Praying as in the way we do in today's collect makes human nature appear far too weak, and might even give people an excuse for behaving badly. We really should give anybody an excuse to say, *"It wasn't my fault!"*

Well, I suppose that's all right for the super virtuous, but it isn't true to the muddles of most people's lives. We know from everyday experience how hard it is always to do the right things; we really know from the inside what St Paul was talking about when he wrote in his letter to the Romans *"I don't understand myself. I do not do things I intend to but often the things I hate. Even though the will to do good is in me, the power isn't, and so I end up by not doing the good things I want to do, and doing the bad things I don't want to do."*

But the problem is deeper than that. It's hard enough to do the good things we want to do - but very often we don't even want what is right even when we know perfectly well what it is.

That is why the heart of the Christian religion is not a set of rules and regulations, but God's offer of a new life. In the sacraments we celebrate this wonderful power of God to redirect our lives and change our wills. If God can make a few drops of water the instrument of new life in baptism, if he can make ordinary bread and wine the body and blood of Christ, just think what he what might he be able to do with us - transforming our hearts to want what he wants.

The prayer we have prayed is a necessary prayer for every day, because every day we need God's transforming grace to love what he commands and desire what he promises.

The solution to this dilemma lies in the last part of the prayer: that *"among the many changes of this world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found."*

If we find it difficult not only to do the right things, but even to want them, it is probably because our hearts are fixed on the passing goods of this life and not on God's promise which is not for this life only but for ever. You remember how Jesus once said, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God* and everything else will fall into place as well. Or, rather more mundane, think of the Spice Girls' song: *What do you really, really want?*