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Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost – John 7.14-24

Discernment Series I

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Making choices, especially big choices, choices that affect the course of our lives, or the lives of others, can be among the most difficult and challenging experiences we ever have. How do we weigh up and decide between options? And, if we are people of faith, people who seek to live in accord with God's will and not just please ourselves, how do we discover God's part in it all – what God is saying, where God is leading and so on? Many times there is much at stake in the decision, many times the path not obvious or clear cut. How do we move forward at these times and not become paralysed by fear and indecision? Discernment is the name our tradition gives to the process of trying to attend to our lives and choices, with a view to seeing where God is, with a view to being faithful and responsive to God's leading. In the next few weeks, we are going to be exploring different facets of this process of discernment illuminated in the scriptures. Tonight we'll begin by looking in a bit more depth at what discernment is and why it matters.

When I was studying ethics at university, there were two main theories about how you approach major moral or life decisions. One was called consequentialism – its basic premise is that you decide what to do by weighing up the *consequences* of action. The right choice is the choice that has the best overall outcome – the one that makes the most people happy, or causes the least suffering. The second theory comes from the philosopher Immanuel Kant – its basic premise is that you decide what to do by following the *rules* that all rational people agree should be binding on everyone. So, for

example, all rational people agree that telling the truth should be a basic rule of conduct – if you can't rely on people telling the truth, then nothing would work, basic trust in social life would break down and so on. So – it is always the right thing to do to tell the truth, even if in a particular case that means bad consequences might follow – the famous example Kant gives is whether you should tell the truth to a murderer who knocks at your door asking whether his escaped victim is hiding in your house – even then, he thinks, the right thing to do is to tell the truth.

As you'd expect, numerous variations, subtleties, discussions about exceptions, and so on have grown around these basic theories, and notice that both approaches call for interpretation or discernment in practice – what really might be the consequences that follow from this choice; what does the truth look like in these circumstances; what about conflicting moral rules and duties, and so on. Without ever having heard of these theories, most of us implicitly ask these kinds of questions when we are facing the big issues in our lives – what should I do? What is right? What will happen if I do or don't? Who will get hurt?

Believers, however, add another whole dimension to this process. As well as trying to work out what we want in life, what the consequences of certain actions might be, what our duties and obligations are, we add in the question of what *God* wants of us. Our listening is expanded to include, you might say, a third party – not just ourselves, not just other people, but also God. And rather than simplifying the process of discernment, adding God can seemingly make it a whole lot more difficult. How does God speak in such situations? How can I know that what I think might be God, really is God – as opposed to my super-ego or social expectation or what the Book of Common Prayer called 'the devices and desires of our own hearts'? These questions are at the heart of discernment – they are questions about the criteria for what Jesus calls 'judging with right judgement'.

Before we turn to them, though, there is a prior question to ask – should we ‘add’ God at all? We all know the dangers of appeals to God’s will – people blow themselves and others up because they have become convinced *that* is God’s will, people deprive themselves of their heart’s desire because they have been convinced *that* is God’s will – if it is so difficult to be sure that we can identify where God is or what (so to speak) God ‘wants’, then wouldn’t it be safer, less risk of religious abuse, just to do the best we can humanly speaking, weighing up as responsibly and generously as we can the issues as we see them, and trust that God is somehow in that?

There is an important truth that. The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who faced the agonising choice whether to be part of the plot to assassinate Hitler, insisted that God does not displace our human reasoning or absolve us of our responsibility in discernment. He says, in trying to discern God’s will, we have to be mindful of our context and draw on prior experience, we need to consider both the content of commandment and the issue of consequences. ‘Under no circumstances’, he warns, are we to count on ‘unmediated inspirations’ which may lead to self-deception; rather, a sober and watchful attitude should prevail. In short, ‘in order to discern what the will of God may be, the entire array of human abilities will be employed’.¹ God, in other words, will not rescue us out of the agony of our own choice and our responsibility for it, and if we have the sense that we have been so rescued, then it is probably a delusion.

Yet Bonhoeffer also insists that part of what happens in the life of discipleship, in learning to love God with all our hearts, is the transformation of our reasoning itself. We must use our own reasoning and sensing to the full, but part of what happens as we seek to bring these capacities more and more in touch with God, open in prayer to God, is that these capacities themselves begin to expand. Our thinking becomes more

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp.323-324.

generous and less rigid, more filled with possibility and less anxious. We become capable of a different quality of knowing: Jesus says, 'Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own'.

One understanding of discernment is that God has set some cosmic exam for our lives which, on the basis of minimal and extremely ambiguous clues, we are supposed to get right on pain of eternal punishment. An understanding that I find a lot more plausible is that through the process of discernment we are seeking to bring our perceptions and desires into line with God's perceptions and desires. We are doing this, not because we might be punished if we get it wrong, but so that we learn to see things as God sees them, with God's priorities, with God's compassion. We are learning to share the mind of Christ (1 Cor.2.16). Why are we interested in that?

Because in Jesus, God is revealed to be not quite who God had been thought to be. God is often kinder than our image of God – remember it was God, not the crowds, whose priority was to heal a man on the Sabbath even though it was against the 'rules'. In Jesus, we glimpse that just maybe God wants more for us than we have dared believe, than we have dared want for ourselves. Maybe seeking to discern 'God's will' is not so much a matter of consenting to be thwarted or continuously tested, but of being invited to be part of something bigger, more healing, more life-giving and spacious than our vision of our choices, our problems, our options would ever let us imagine. This does not mean we are saved from difficult, ambiguous and sometimes very painful choices. It does mean that through our faithful listening and responsiveness, we are being given the chance to participate more actively in God's love and compassion and healing work for the world. How we go about that more active listening and participation, how we go about discerning God's will, will be our focus for the next few weeks.