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Discernment and the Scriptures – John 8.1-11

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Tonight we continue our series on discernment, which is one of the fundamental issues in the life of faith. How do we bring our lives and our choices into line with God's being and love for the world? Or, as we sometimes put it, how do we come to know what God's will is for us as individuals and as community?

The frame in which we understand the work of discernment matters a great deal. Last week I contrasted two ways of understanding it. One treats God as being out to test us - as if our lives are a kind of cosmic exam which, on the basis of minimal and ambiguous clues, we are supposed to get right on pain of eternal damnation. On this view, trying to discern God's will is accompanied by anxiety and the search for righteousness, the need to get life right and the fear of getting it wrong. It is a view which sees God as separate from and over against us – a kind of super individual, whose pleasure we may or may not rightly guess at.

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 and actions into line with God's perceptions and desires. We are doing this, not because we might be punished if we get it wrong despite our best efforts, 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). On this view, discernment is part of the process of our transformation, part of the way we learn to recognise and let go that within us which is inconsistent with God's love for us and God's love for the world – part of the process

through which we learn to come to the truth of ourselves and so offer ourselves more and more wholeheartedly and authentically to life.

On this understanding, discernment might still provoke anxiety and anguish – as we struggle to see where God is, what God wants, what we are being called to take up or let go. Discernment is still something we can get ‘wrong’ – we can misread things, fail to attend, and our lives in consequence are less apt than perhaps they might be to make God visible to others or to be channels of healing grace. So on this view, discernment matters just as deeply as it does on the ‘cosmic exam’ account, but its context is God’s love for us and for the world – God’s desire to bring all things to reconciliation. And that is why truthful discernment brings us (maybe after much struggle and turmoil) to the peace beyond all understanding, and deeper into the ground of our own life.

So with this context in mind we turn to an obvious place to begin looking to learn God’s will for us – and that is in the Scriptures, the Law and the commandments. I have a problem, a choice that confronts me – what do the Scriptures have to say about it? What does God, speaking through the Scriptures, have to suggest? And how will I know it is God I am hearing in the Scriptures, and not something else?

The story of the woman caught in adultery is thought not to belong originally to the text of John’s gospel. Nevertheless, it is thought to be ‘canonical’ in the sense that it is profoundly consonant with the theme being explored in chapters 7 and 8. That theme concerns the identity of Jesus and the anxiety of the crowds and the authorities to discern the truth of who he is – is this teacher from God or not? Are we being led astray or not? Does God wish us to silence and punish him or not? In dialogue after dialogue, we hear the people wrestle with the seeming incompatibilities in their experience (the signs Jesus has done, the authority of his teaching) and their reading of Scripture (‘search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee’). In our story, the

scribes and Pharisees are testing Jesus and testing their own discernment of Jesus, on the basis of Jesus's discernment of God's view of the woman caught in adultery.

From Jesus, in this story, we hear how *not* to read the scriptures and use the Law in discerning God's will. This is not because Jesus is a wishy-washy liberal (as some might interpret this approach), but because he has in mind always the context of God's gift of the Law to Israel – which is a context of loving relationship rather than moralistic prescription, an invitation to a people to form its life in accord with the life and compassion of God (caring for the orphan and the alien in the land) rather than a means by which the 'righteous' get to secure their own claims against God and oppress everyone else. Given this context, when Jesus is confronted with the embryonic lynch mob, he refuses the terms of engagement. These hyper religious folk are clearly using and abusing both the woman and the Law. They show no mercy, as the spirit of the Law demands, deliberately shaming the woman by 'making her stand before all of them'; they are selective even with the commandment itself, bringing only the woman and not also the man involved as the relevant Torah teaching demanded. Jesus calls their bluff – this is not really about the Law and their care for it, or about their care humbly to discern God's presence (or not) in Jesus. This is about propping up their self-righteousness, which Jesus superbly punctures with his invitation that the one without sin cast the first stone.

So, so much for legalism. What we know from Jesus again and again is that if you are using the law, the scriptures, the commandments to make yourself feel good about yourself at someone else's expense or to generate a guaranteed sense that you have done the 'right' thing in any particular case, then you are fundamentally misusing this gift of God. You are setting yourself up in judgement and you are seeking self-righteousness, and by doing so you are closed to hearing the living Word. Jesus himself might be in front of you, and you will be oblivious.

But not all appeal to scripture and commandment is legalistic and self-serving, and so a question remains – what kind of a role does the teaching of Scripture have in our discernment of God’s will? In particular, what are we supposed to do when a word of Scripture seems to cut across my personal or our cultural sense of what might be fitting or permissible or even ‘loving’ in a particular context? A verse about divorce, for example, or about homosexuality, or women in ministry? If I come to a more nuanced or less prescriptive interpretation of certain things, is that just a sign that I’m evading the difficult call of God on my life? Or is it that I’m discerning the true spirit behind a superficially unpromising text? How do I know the difference?

This is a huge subject (and probably needs its own series at some point), but let me say a couple of things. First, let’s remember what Law is, what Scripture is. It is the gift of God to the people who are called into living and transforming relationship with God. One of Scripture’s consistent teachings is that apart from being in relationship with God, we can see nothing rightly – not the world, not each other, not God, not the Scriptures themselves. Apart from God, St Paul says, people become ‘futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds [are] darkened’ (Rom.1.21). Jesus is always chastising the religious authorities for misreading their texts.

So part of what this means is that Scripture can be a guide for our lives only if it is read in the context of a living relationship with God, which means that Scripture is always to be read in the spirit of prayer. If we relate to it as a stand-alone set of rules, which could just be adopted (like road rules) as ‘over-against’ us or disconnected from relationship, then we will misread it. This is why Jesus insists that it is the Holy Spirit who will ‘guide you into all the truth’ (John 16.13) – and remember that the Holy Spirit is the one who draws us into the pattern of death and resurrection. Only as we are in the process of dying to our old self-justifying self, receiving our true identity from God and

learning to love one another as brothers and sisters, are we remotely in a position to see as God sees, or understand the Scriptures as a guide to doing God's will.

I believe that we do meet God in the Scriptures and that God speaks to us through them. The God we meet here, however, is full of surprises – sometimes hidden, sometimes calling people (like Mary) to utterly outrageous and morally suspect enterprises, turning failure and betrayal into new life, looking on earth like nothing recognisably Messianic. Part of what this means is that Scripture is both one of the criteria by which we seek to discern God's will, and that our hearing of Scripture itself needs to be discerned. And that is a matter of our whole lives being handed over to listening, humility and obedience – which (as Laurence Freeman has said) is not first 'doing what you are told, but becoming the Word you hear'.