

1 September 2012

## **Discernment and Community – Acts 21.1-14**

Sarah Bachelard

Discernment is an issue for Christians and Christian communities because of what we believe about God. We believe that God is alive – not just an idol or a projection of our own fears and desires. We believe that God makes it possible for us to be in living relationship *with* God, to be transformed by love and to participate actively in what God is doing in the world – making peace, overcoming injustice, setting people free from captivity of various kinds. Our faith, then, is not about endlessly trying to placate God by offering sacrifices or following the rules; it is about becoming lovers of God and of others, agents of God’s love for the world. In the context of this living relationship, we are learning to listen for who we are being called to be and become, for what our part might be in God’s work. That listening is what we call discernment.

This means that the essential issues in discernment are the quality of our listening, and finding ways to get a handle on whether we have really understood what we think we’ve heard. In the New Testament, the role of community in this process of listening and interpretation is profoundly significant and yet also complex. Three things strike me as particularly important to bear in mind.

First, as Christians we are members of the body of Christ – we are members (Paul says) one of another. Because we are so used to these phrases, they can just float over us - more religious wallpaper; at best an exhortation to generic good will. Let’s listen again – we are members, one of another. What does that mean? Christian life is about being reconciled, at one with God – and so being reconciled with ourselves and each

other – not divided any more by fear or rivalry or hatred. As I grow in love for and union with God, I necessarily grow in love for and communion with people. As the barriers and fears that separate me from God come down, so do the barriers and fears that separate me from my deepest self and from my neighbour. If this is true, then my good (what God wants for me) cannot be detached from your good (what God wants for you). We are *all* one in Christ – we are not a collection of individuals making our way to ‘heaven’ independently, but my healing and true aliveness is necessarily bound up with yours. ‘Our life and death are with the neighbour’ say the desert fathers. St Benedict understood his monastic communities in this way – not a group of individuals who happen share a journey along the same road, but a community which gets to heaven together or not at all [if you’ve seen the film *The Way*, you see the formation of just this kind of community as a random gathering of isolated individuals starts to realise that for one of them to make their pilgrimage, all of them have to make it]. For what can some of us being reconciled to God mean, if half of us are left behind?

This is why St Paul understands that one of the essential criteria for discernment, for testing whether we have listened well to what we think God is saying to us, is the effect of our choices on the neighbour, on the community. Does it build up the community or not? Does it cause others to stumble in their journey towards God, their movement towards healing and wholeness and freedom? Does it contribute to God’s reconciling work in the world? These questions go vastly against the grain of our individualistic society, our instinctive defence of our ‘autonomy’. They ask us to be mindful, not simply of what I have a ‘right’ to, but the common good, the good of all those others who are beloved of God as I am. If discernment is about listening to God, and God is about drawing all things to reconciliation in Christ, then the good of the community must be part of what we are listening for, part of our understanding of God’s work in and among us.

This, however, brings me to my second point: communities (as well as individuals) can be mistaken about what their 'good' is, or what is necessary for their edification and healing, or in how they being called to make visible God's life in the world. They can become encased inside their own sense of what is 'right' or 'good' or 'necessary', identifying God with that – and so fail to notice that the living God is seeking to draw them in new and unforeseen directions, to a new maturity and vulnerability, away from what turns out to have been a false resting place. In all the great movements for reform, Christian communities have been divided about where God really is – think of the Christian divisions over slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the apartheid churches in South Africa, divisions over women in ministry and homosexuality. In all these cases, the rhetoric of the necessity for Christian unity, or mutual upbuilding, or not causing scandal or occasions for stumbling is readily used against the 'new thing' – the liberating wind of the Spirit – often enough with rejection or persecution of the 'disturbers of the peace'. And though we might think, with hindsight, we can see where some of these communities have gone wrong in rejecting the message of the particular prophets that confronted them, this does not seem to make discerning the next prophetic moment easier or clearer.

In the same way, there must have been numberless occasions (including the episode from our reading tonight), when an individual's sense of the call on his or her life is not recognised or understood or supported by their community. Paul is twice urged by his fellow disciples not to go to Jerusalem. These folk seem absolutely clear that they speak for the Holy Spirit, and not simply out of their own opinion – and there would have been easy arguments to make about what the community 'really' needed from him (and it was not to risk death by making an optional journey to Jerusalem) Yet Paul sticks to his guns. It must have been a lonely place and a risky-feeling discernment.

And this leads me to my third point. What does a community that is committed to the practice of discernment look like? How does it sustain itself and its individual members in listening and faithfulness, allowing for the possibility of newness and risk as well as accountability and the common good? *Being* a discerning community means, I think, holding the tension, the paradox of individual and corporate discernment – recognising that each may be mistaken or partial, so that each needs to be accountable to the other. Prophets disrupt the status quo for the sake of a fuller wholeness and reconciliation; the community takes care that it is not led astray by false prophets. This calls individuals *and* communities to develop practices of deep listening sourced in prayer and silence. It requires a stance of humility ('I beseech you in the bowels of Christ', said Oliver Cromwell, 'consider that ye may be wrong') and the capacity to wait in the space of uncertainty and unclarity, perhaps for a long time. It took the Quaker community in the United States 20 years to discern the question of slavery, holding open the question respectfully and patiently until it came to a common mind – and although it did take 20 years, when they finally agreed as a body that they rejected the practice of slavery, the Quakers were 100 years ahead of the rest of the United States. Being a discerning community calls then for vulnerability, patience and non-anxious trust that, despite confusion and uncertainty, God is present and loving to all, and will make known the way of peace. Crucially, even when someone must act before there is a common mind, a discerning community and the individuals within it will seek to speak and act in ways that keep themselves open to listening and committed ultimately to reconciliation. When Paul 'would not be persuaded' out of his absolute conviction of the way he must go, his community did not reject or abandon him – even though, it seems, they were not fully convinced. They kept silence together, entrusting themselves to God, and saying simply 'The Lord's will be done'.