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The Living God: The Mark of Discernment (John 1. 24-31, 35-39)

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At the heart of our faith tradition is the testimony that God is a living God. God is not like idols made of wood and iron, silver and gold who, say the psalmist and the prophets, have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see; ears, but do not hear (cf. Ps.135.16-17). No – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Hannah and Samuel, Isaiah and John the Baptist, this God purposes and calls, is active to create and reconcile. This God will do ‘new things’.

It’s difficult to know how exactly to relate to this language, these metaphors of divine agency. I don’t think it’s helpful, for example, if it conjures up an image of a super-person in the sky manipulating events. But what I think *is* important in this way of speaking is how it expresses an experience of God as a reality which invites relationship, and is *other* to us and not just something we’ve made up. Faith is about responding to this One who calls. Our tradition often describes this responsiveness in metaphors like listening, attending, obeying, seeking God’s will and following God’s way.

And this living call of God is what makes the practice of discernment a critical part of discipleship. The word ‘discernment’ comes from the Latin ‘dis’, meaning apart, and ‘cernere’, to distinguish or sift. Discernment is about seeking to listen well, to perceive more clearly, to be responsive to the deeper truth of things so that we may act with the grain of God, with the grain of life. To value discernment means recognising it’s possible to fail to see and hear what’s really going on, to be obtuse. It’s possible to act unwisely, to be deceived about our motives, desires and character. This recognition of the possibility of being mistaken, deluded, deceived, of living reactively and superficially has led to an enormous literature about how to learn and practice discernment, including tests for discernment (‘how do we know

we've heard rightly, after all?'. Some of this literature is pretty technical and dense – so tonight, what I want to do is to lift up what I think are key habits of the heart that enable discernment. I'd like us to deepen our communal understanding of what a discerning stance feels like and how we might grow, individually and together, in our practice of this way.

First and foremost, discernment involves paying attention. More often than not, God comes to us cleverly disguised as our life. Which means, if we want to be responsive to what God is doing, we must learn to pay attention to our experience. This involves attending both to myself *and* to what is around me – to my context, the responses of others, the wisdom of a tradition, to signs of life or death, to intimations of a direction or path.

In tonight's passage, we heard John the Baptist proclaim his deep recognition of Jesus, his essential meaning: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" This is an instance of discernment. John saw the truth which was lying beneath appearances (after all, no one else recognised him). His capacity to do this seems to follow from his having paid profound attention both to himself, to God and to the currents of life around him.

He's listened to the wisdom of his tradition – he's heard of the promised Messiah. He's awake to the corruption and self-serving games of the religious establishment of his day. Importantly he's aware of what's going on in him: he knows he's called to a ministry of baptising and also knows he's not the Messiah. So he's in touch with a deep awareness that God is in the process of doing something, even though he doesn't fully know what that involves: 'Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me', he says. All of which means that he's *looking* for Jesus – he's open to recognising the truth when he sees it. Significantly, the language and imagery of sight is pervasive in this passage. The implication is you must have eyes to see – otherwise you'll miss the deeper reality. And having 'eyes to see' is related to the practice of attending to what is, in fact, already there.

And yet – it's not just any kind of attention. The practice of discernment involves letting reality – the truth of another person, a situation, a life direction – begin to reveal itself, to show itself on its terms. What's needed is a non-defensive, non-grasping attention which trusts that the truth, the way and the life will reveal itself if we give it room. So *how* we pay attention is important – and here, I think, three further habits of the heart are essential.

The first of these is a willingness not to know – a willingness to suspend premature interpretation, judgement and resolution. Discernment involves epistemic humility. John twice insists that before he recognised Jesus, he did not know who he was looking for: 'I myself did not know him'. And because he was willing not to know for long enough, insight dawned as a gift. For me, a profound experience of discerning the deeper direction of my life – discerning my call to ministry – came only when I'd finally stopped trying to be in control of the answer, when I'd finally admitted that I had no idea what came next. It felt frightening to be in that space of unknowing, but also truthful and fruitful. I was at last in the place where I could listen deeply *beyond* myself.

Second, and relatedly, discernment involves patience, the willingness to wait. Sometimes it takes *time* for truth to become evident, for the call or direction of our lives to come clear. The ancient Greeks had two words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* refers to chronological or sequential time – it's the kind of timetable time by which we so often demand things happen. *Kairos* time is different – it's about the 'right' or opportune time – 'when the fullness of time was come', St Paul wrote, God sent his Son (Gal. 4.4). Discernment is connected to *kairos* time – there is a season for everything, there's need to let things to ripen rather than snatch them from the tree. Like John the Baptist, who waited patiently to see what God was doing, neither seeking to force an early outcome nor giving up in despair, a discerning community is patient, trusting and non-anxious.

And finally, the third habit of a discerning heart is the willingness to act in faith – to take the next step. When two of John's disciples followed Jesus, they didn't

know where they were going, and Jesus doesn't give them an itinerary in advance. He just says: 'Come and see'. They came, and 'saw where he was staying' (that metaphor of sight again), and remained with him that day. They're trying out whether there's something in this – whether this teacher is trustworthy, whether he's who they think he is. Then they invite Simon Peter to join them – continuing to discern simply by taking the next step, seeing whether, as the Quakers put it, 'way will open'.

At our community day, I shared something of the story of Benedictus. And I think these habits of discernment *have* characterised our life together. From the beginning I've been paying attention to what was rising up in me and in others – the call to enable a contemplative community. We've been willing not to know where it was going – to feel our way as we've gone, testing our discernment by taking the next step; we've waited for what felt like the 'right' time to incorporate, for example, and in their right time other things have announced themselves – our L'Chaim groups, our music ministry, Kaleidoscope. A community marked by a practice of discernment lives responsively, growing organically, listening together for where the Spirit is leading us. I know that many of you are actively engaging that process for yourselves in relation to your participation at Benedictus – exploring your further involvement ... and this is so exciting and a real sign of life!

And *this* is context in which we're seeking to discern membership of the Benedictus Council in the coming year. In this too, we're seeking to listen together for who among us might be called to exercise leadership in this way. The Council is a group with whom I 'take counsel' as we continue to discern our way and respond to our vocation. Tonight I invite you to let yourself be open to the question about whether this role might be something you are drawn to. Also, and equally importantly, I invite you actively to reflect about others who may have gifts that are needed on our Council at this time in our life – remember discernment is always about context – who is needed for this season? Sometimes how I am helped to discern is because you see in me something I haven't yet fully recognised. We can do

this for each other – help each other recognise who we are and are called to become. After the service tonight, over supper, I invite you to have some intentional conversations – to talk together about what leadership *you* discern is needed now, and who might offer these gifts. Even if you haven't been at Benedictus very long, and don't know many people – your perspective about what you see here, what you wonder about or would like to cultivate, can be an important part of this shared work of discernment. No one is unqualified to participate in this conversation.

And remember. This isn't just a pragmatic process. We're having this conversation – not only because we want to choose a Council, but because we want more and more to be formed as a community capable of practising discernment as one of the marks of our common life. This is vital to our formation as disciples of the living God, and part of our vocation to make visible in the world and the church the possibility of living responsively to the One who calls us more fully into life.