

8 September 2012

Discernment and the Self – John 5. 2-9

Sarah Bachelard

Someone I knew told the story of a painful time in her life, when nothing seemed to be going right and she was desperate to find out what God really wanted of her. She cried out to God, ‘what do you want me to do?’ and heard God say back, ‘what do *you* want?’ It was the first time she imagined that what *she* wanted might have anything to do with it. Over the past few weeks, we have been exploring discernment – the question of how we discern what God might be saying to us or wanting of us. We have looked at discernment and the Scriptures, signs and community – now, in this final reflection, we turn to the question of discernment and the self, the relationship between my deepest desires and God’s desire for me, between my will and God’s will.

Even to put the question this way takes us to some potentially hazardous territory. In the language of discernment, we often talk about God’s ‘will’ or what God ‘wants’, but that can convey the impression that God is a super-individual, a bigger version of us with our wills and wants and desires. It can make it seem as though my will and God’s will are in competition. And if God’s will is always supposed to win, then God can feel ‘over against’ me, a bit of a bully actually, whose wants I need to learn to anticipate and then obey. If this is our implicit picture of what seeking God’s will means, then it can have us believe that what I want or desire is not really important, or is likely to be suspect, so that I learn to distrust my own desiring and become ready always to set it aside. But as we know from our human relationships, including our relationship with ourselves, if we regularly suppress or neglect or bury our own needs and desires,

we end up (at some level) feeling resentful and thwarted, and our buried frustration emerges in other, often very unhealthy, ways. It certainly doesn't seem a recipe for wholeness and joy.

Yet, we also know from the Scriptural tradition that there can be apparent conflicts between what God 'wants' of me and what I 'want' for myself. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus says that he wants the cup of death to pass from him, but then he hands himself over: 'not my will, but thine be done'. We don't know exactly what Mary wanted before her visitation from the angel Gabriel, but it's reasonably safe to assume that she didn't want to become a single mother. Yet she also hands herself over: 'let it be unto me, according to your word'. And we could go on: there is the extraordinarily reluctant and prevaricating Moses told to proclaim freedom to the Israelites in Egypt, and most of the prophets frantically resisting their commissions. So, isn't it just true that we can't really trust our own 'wants', or at least that if we are to be faithful, we must always be ready to drop our wants if God asks us?

These stretching questions take us to fundamental aspects of theology – our picture of God and our picture of human being in relation to God. They take us directly into the paradox Jesus taught about losing our lives in order to find them, dying in order to live – and the question of how we are to understand *that*. So – a few reflections. They are I guess confessions of faith.

First, God likes us (James Alison). God wants us to enjoy the extraordinary gift of being alive. God wants that for us so much, says John's gospel, that God became one of us to set us free from the deep knots we tie ourselves in, the ways we block life and love in ourselves and each other. Jesus says, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10.10). If we deal death and suffering to one another, if we consent to our own diminishment, then that is not consistent with God's desire for what our lives should be. Loving and being grateful to God means loving and being grateful for

our lives, seeking to live the life we are given in all its fullness and possibility. Irenaeus says that ‘the glory of God is a human being fully alive’.

So one thing God wants, you might say, is for us to get in touch with our own lives: ‘Is the life I’m living, the life that wants to live in me?’ (Parker Palmer) How do we discern our life? Well, what sets you on fire? What brings you real contentment and joy? Where do you feel most alive? Our deepest desiring, our sense of aliveness and being at home with ourselves, being free to be and free to create, are all part of how we recognise what abundant life is for us and for our communities. Friedrich Buechner said that ‘vocation is the place where your own deep gladness meets the world’s deep need’; the Sufi poet Rumi said ‘let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love’.

In other words, we can trust our loving, our aliveness as part of the way that God speaks to us and guides us, as a vital part of the way of discernment. Often, as religious people, we forget that – we expect God to make life difficult.

But of course, here is where it can get complicated. Sometimes, the habits of a lifetime have alienated us from ourselves. Sometimes, it is in being asked what we want that we discover we don’t really know, or that what we say we most deeply want, we don’t want after all. Sometimes, it can be more comfortable to be a victim of our thwarted lives, than to take the risk of really living them. I wonder if Jesus had a bit that sense of the lame man who had lain for thirty-eight years, overlooked in the rush for the healing waters. How much did he really want to be healed? How much did he really want to live? ‘Do you *want* to be made well?’ Jesus asks him. It’s interesting that he doesn’t give a straight answer – there’s a hint of self-pity: ‘I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up and someone always gets there ahead of me’. Jesus bypasses the issue of the waters altogether: ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk’. Choose life, and life is given. And yet ... what about Jesus in the Garden, what about

Dietrich Bonhoeffer imprisoned and longing to be free? They didn't get what they wanted ...

God's gift of life is offered and received by us in contexts which are out of alignment. Our lives and communities are shot through with counter-forces – forces which tend to death and alienation, rather than life and fulfillment. *How* that is so is the mystery of evil. *That* it is so is evident to us all, from the ways in which we are estranged from ourselves, to the pain in relationships, to the appalling sway of death in the world's conflicts. God wants to love and heal this world and sometimes, if we are agents of God's love that will mean being victims of its violence and untruth, as it did for Jesus. And coming to the point of consent to this kind of self-giving may be agonisingly painful: not my will be done, but yours.

But here's the essential thing. God loves the world; God loves us – it's the same love. God's longing for the world; God's longing for us – it's the same longing, the same abundant life. There is no competition here. Giving yourself to God's will is not about self-mutilation or self-diminishment and to think that God *wants* that is just bad theology. Jesus dies in the end *because* he is fully himself, fully alive, living at full stretch and being himself in the face of all that contradicts that. He dies passionately, not just giving up. There's no resignation – and in the end, when he wrestles to the heart of it, his will really is God's will, his life is God's life.

So truthful discernment always leads to life – life for us and for the world .. Do you want to get well? Trust that's what God wants too, and 'let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love'.