

The Mind of Christ: Practising Discernment (Matthew 13.10-17)

Sarah Bachelard

So far in our series, 'Practising the Marks of Benedictus', we've explored hospitality and silence. Hospitality, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, is to do with a basic orientation or disposition of our being. It's not just inviting people to your home from time to time, but a commitment to make space for the other, for the stranger – even for the enemy. To practise hospitality means to 'open copiously to host the other',¹ says theologian Thomas Reynolds, while also committing to 'being-in-relation' such that the stranger without, the stranger within, may become a friend. Being hospitable involves giving up defensiveness, withholding and resistance. It's a way of being, sometimes costly and hard-won, that enables the possibility of true communion.

This practice of hospitality is deepened by the practice of silence – in fact, silence may be its precondition. We can't truly make space for the other, if we are wholly absorbed by ourselves, by the clamour of our opinions, judgements, anxieties and plans. Self-forgetting silence lets the other really be and opens in love towards them. And the more our practice of silence deepens, the more we discover ourselves in fact offering hospitality to God, becoming more radically receptive to the presence of God, more deeply rooted in and transfigured by the love of God. As this happens, not only does our loving begin to share in the character of God's, but our whole way of seeing the world, our perception of reality, our 'mind', begins to be changed.

Contemplative teachers describe this change in various ways. English solitary, Maggie Ross, speaks about a shift from self-conscious to deep mind. Self-conscious mind, she says, 'has a small capacity' and 'is full of noise, static, and chatter'.² It's

¹ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), p.241.

² Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, Vol.1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014), p.42.

not bad but, as I said last week, it is limited – tending to a reductive, partial, fragmenting, self-referencing perception of reality. And the real problem, says Ross, is that this self-conscious mind usually doesn't recognize its own limits: 'it thinks it sees clearly; it thinks it is autonomous; it deludes itself that it is in touch with reality'.³ The work of silence, however, begins to enable our access to another level of mind altogether.⁴ Deep mind is a 'vast, spacious, generous, silent, thinking mind that seems to have knowledge we have never self-consciously learned; that makes unexpected connections ... that not only gives us insights but can tell us when an insight is correct'.⁵ It is when our self-conscious mind is open to and informed by 'deep mind' that real wisdom, real creativity and insight begin to flow.

Cynthia Bourgeault speaks in a similar way of a shift in our consciousness that happens through the work of silence – a shift from an exclusively 'egoic operating system' to what she calls 'the operating system of the heart' – where 'heart' means not just emotion but wholistic intelligence.⁶ By letting go established patterns and habits of mind, a new way of perceiving, thinking and knowing reality becomes available. Bourgeault notes: 'Unlike the egoic operating system, the heart does not perceive through differentiation. It doesn't divide the field into inside and out, subject and object. Rather it perceives by means of harmony ... When heart-awareness becomes fully formed within a person, he or she will be operating out of nondual consciousness'.⁷ We call it wisdom.

St Paul describes this transformation of our consciousness or our way of knowing as 'having the mind of Christ' (Philippians 2.5; 1 Corinthians 2.16). And the third mark of Benedictus, discernment, is connected with this deep contemplative transformation of our capacity to perceive and comprehend reality in a truer and more holistic way. In this reflection, I want to say a bit more about how I understand this mark and its significance.

³ Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, p.42.

⁴ Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, p.41.

⁵ Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, p.2.

⁶ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), pp.33-35.

⁷ Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, p.36.

The word ‘discernment’ comes from the Latin ‘dis’, meaning apart, and ‘cernere’, to distinguish or sift. A commitment to discernment is about seeking to be responsive to the truth of things, sifting (perhaps) the ‘wheat from the chaff’. I’ve been saying that in Christian understanding, our capacity to discern truth is connected in the first instance to the transformation of our very way of knowing. Our Scriptural tradition takes for granted that without our being in relation to God, informed by the Spirit of God, we’re incapable of perceiving the truth of things at any depth. This is because when we human beings are turned in upon ourselves, when our vision of the world is suffused by self-interest and self-preoccupation, we see neither ourselves nor other things clearly; we are self-deceived, our reasoning tends to be falsifying.

We see some spectacular examples of the distorting epistemic effect of narcissism and egotism on the world stage today, but I’m sure we can all think of examples from our own experience – where looking back we can see how a wounded ego, attachment to a certain agenda or story about the past, has led us into a distorted apprehension of ourselves or others, made us blind to what now seems blindingly obvious or unreceptive to a deeper wisdom and insight. Paul writes of those who refused to honour or give thanks to God having become ‘futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened’ (Romans 1.21); and Isaiah proclaimed similarly that those who are out of relationship with God will be incapable of truthful perception. They ‘keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand’ (Isaiah 6.9).

And what this tradition teaches is that if you want to apprehend reality in a deeper and truer way, then your self-referencing, controlling, reductive way of knowing somehow needs to be frustrated – to get to the end of itself. This is what happens through the work of silence. And it’s why Jesus teaches so often in parables. He’s trying to shift, not just *what* people know, but the *way* they know. ‘The reason I speak to them in parables’, he says, ‘is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand” (Matthew 13.13). They’re not getting it –

indeed, they *can't* get it from the level of consciousness with which they grabbing hold of his words – and so the parables function to confound that habitual mind, to create silence and incomprehension – much as Zen koans are designed to confound and frustrate the mind, and so lead the one who's willing to keep contemplating them to break through to a different level.

But what does all this mean in more immediate and practical terms as we seek to discern our own lives or the needs of the world? Particularly as we may feel ourselves operating at some level below Enlightenment?! As we ponder whether to take a certain job, for example? Or struggle with how to be in a difficult relationship, or to 'hear' our vocation or discover our life direction? As we seek to listen, as a community, for how we are to be and what we are to do? Within the context of the ongoing work of silence, how might we cultivate our capacity – as individuals and as a community – for practicing wisdom and living more truthfully?

Well, if the work of discernment involves letting reality begin to reveal itself, to show itself on its terms, then this suggests that what's needed first and foremost is a non-grasping, non-anxious attention. In practice, this kind of non-grasping attentiveness requires a willingness not to know, at least for a time – a willingness to suspend premature interpretation, judgement and resolution. We hold open a question, and give up trying to be in control of its answer – as we listen deeply, seek simply to notice what's happening within and around us. Discernment involves a tolerance for unknowing, for epistemic humility – and this is why it is also often a communal process. We need the perspective and wisdom of others to enhance and correct our own. C.S. Lewis once said that 'two heads are better than one, not because they are less likely to go wrong, but because they're less likely to go wrong in the same direction'!

Relatedly then, practising discernment involves patience, waiting. It can take *time* for truth to become evident, for the call or direction of our lives to come clear, as our capacity to 'see' and 'hear' aright is itself expanded. 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, on the other hand, is 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; it means neither seeking to force an early outcome nor giving up in despair, but trusting we will recognize truth when it is revealed – and here 'signs' to look for include the movement of energy within and around us, a sense of peace and rightness or even necessity (the way I must go), a sense of life being served rather than thwarted.

And finally, practising discernment involves, I think, the willingness to act in faith – to take the next step even though we may still be present to doubts or fears. The Quakers speak of testing the rightness of discernment in the light of what happens next – does the 'way open' or does it close? Very often, in the gospels, it's as someone sets out in faith that they're healed or that their trust in the call they have discerned is vindicated.

Discernment, then, is both a fruit and task of the spiritual life. I've said it is founded in the work of silence, the gradual transformation of our mind, and involves the commitment to practise a generous kind of attention, humility, patience and responsive (sometimes daring) action. These are habits of mind or ways of being that are not much in evidence in our common life (think of the tone of social media or parliamentary debate). And we see how lack of them leads to un-wisdom in political and social life, to destruction of community and of the earth, and a pervasive culture of impatience and anxiety. Our commitment to the mark of discernment calls us as a community to practise and to witness to the possibility of a different way of being, a different way of knowing. As St Paul put it, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12.2).