

Soul Spark: Session 5



Discernment

Living faith involves choices. What to do or not do? What to pay attention to, what to leave alone? Underlying these choices is the question – what is it that God wants me to do? For some these choices seem easy and obvious, for others a struggle and a confusion. Most of us live with a mix of both.

Jesus called his disciples to follow, to journey, to live out their faith, and we take this as a basic understanding of the call of God to each human being. And yet finding the way on this journey requires a discerning within the broad sense of the call. But how do we do this?

Often ‘faithful choices’ are based upon guesswork, assumptions and presumptions rather than discernment. You only have to listen to people explaining their choices to hear which it is. Along with this there is often also a deep underlying insecurity – an awareness that the ‘discernment’ is weak – if not significantly flawed.

At other times choices are avoided, put off, or given to others to make, resulting in a sense of fatalistic blowing with the prevailing winds of the moment.

Our faith is in a God who leads and guides through life and the Christian spiritual tradition offers significant ways of recognising this, of discerning the leading of the Spirit in one’s life. Sadly for many in our churches little is offered that encourages practical and personal exploration and discovery of ways of listening to the leading of the Spirit.

‘God is in everything, closer to me than I am to myself. God is in ever fact, every moment. Everything and everyone is sacred. Every bush is burning, if only we have the eyes to see’.¹

This is a rather mind blowing perspective on life and faith. How many burning bushes have I missed since I got up this morning? What if I had picked up on just a few? How would my life be affected?

The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola offer one of the most comprehensive and practical approaches to discernment in the Christian tradition.

Foundational to his approach is the awareness of the nature of God – gracious and loving unconditionally (as we have explored already) and it is this which provides the reference point for discernment. Within this is the personal and purposeful nature of God’s intention for each human being. Ignatius puts it in terms of us becoming free from attachments in order to more fully love and serve God. Another way of putting this is in terms of God’s desire that we become the person we were created to be, free of other pressures and addictions that hinder this growth. Thus awareness of the nature of God and the intention of God for each of us as individuals is the fundamental orientation from which we can start to seek to make choices in life that are aligned with the intention of God – i.e. to be discerning.

¹ Gerard W Hughes, *God where are you?* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997) page 2

Soul Spark: Session 5



Discernment

Ignatius provides two sets of guidelines that mark two stages of development in discernment. In the first set of discernment guidelines, it is easy to see an awareness of the fruit of the Spirit as described by St Paul in Galatians 5 as providing helpful insight into how to practically apply this.

Paul speaks of the nature of the fruit of the spirit. All too often this has been read as a description of what we should be striving to manifest in our life. Be more loving, more self-controlled, more peaceful etc, all in all being a burden and a task for life. Longer reflection with the text in the awareness of the nature of grace suggests this was not Paul's intention at all. Rather that the fruit of the Spirit are simply that – fruit of the work of the Spirit within us, not the fruit of our own efforts. Taken this way, all we can do is notice in life when we find ourselves, without our own conscious effort, experiencing love, joy, peace, kindness, self-control etc. The conclusion of Paul's discussion is spiritually most helpfully expressed in the NIV translation – 'therefore keep in step with the Spirit'. There seems a strong resonance here with Ignatius – to notice where the fruit of the Spirit are being experienced in life – and notice what seems to be enabling that to happen, and so to move with it. Equally he offers the importance of moving in the opposite direction to that which seems to be diminishing to doing the opposite. Keeping in step with the Spirit is about awareness of the movement of the Spirit and seeking to move in the same way. It is possible to offer a broader generalisation here – that the increase of the fruit of the Spirit is recognised through an increase in 'spiritual energy'. Thus noticing the sense of inner energy and seeking to go with that which seems to be moving towards greater energy becomes the key.²

This is very practical. We can reflect on a day – notice where there were times when our inner mood and sense seemed to have greater energy, love, joy, peace... reflect on what seemed to stimulate that movement and seek to learn from this – that such things produce the fruit of the Spirit and therefore are worth returning to. Here we start to see how we can recognise burning bushes. The effect of taking a moment to appreciate the beauty of a flower, or of taking time to attend to the needs of someone can be recognised. In the recognition and appreciation of the effect more space is given for further movement of the Spirit. Ignatius holds this reflecting on experience as fundamental to discernment in life and offers it as a regular exercise – the Examen of Consciousness or Review of the Day³ This is something he recommended as the absolute minimum for prayer in a day.

It is worth mentioning two further aspects to discernment that build on this foundation. Firstly – that of awareness of that which leads in the opposite direction to that of the fruit of the Spirit. Those that de-energise, that diminish love, joy, peace etc. Here the invitation is very similar to that which energises. Reflect on what might be the underlying cause and seek

² Good sources of more on this subject are Chapter 5 of Gerard W Hughes *Oh God Why?* (Darton, Longman and Todd 1989), Chapter 6 of Gerard W Hughes *God in all things* (Darton Longman and Todd 2003) and Margaret Silf, *Landmarks* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998)

³ This is described in various places including Gerard W Hughes, *God of Surprises* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985) and Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread* (Paulist Press, 1995)

Soul Spark: Session 5



Discernment

God's grace to make choices that move away from this. Often some of the most important insights for our spiritual growth come out of the awarenesses that emerge from reflecting on these de-energising moments. In God's economy, all is used.

Secondly, the action that results from the discerning reflection will have an effect. Moving with the life giving movements or acting against the life-sapping movements will be life-giving if they are Spirit led. If in discovering that acting in response to discernment has the opposite effect that can indicate some motivations that are not God focussed.

Developing this foundation of discernment in the everyday has a significant effect upon awareness of God and of the way in which we make choices, and thus the ability to discern and move in the way God is seeking to lead your life.

Ignatius' second set of guidelines on discernment are held back for deeper development of discernment. They are particularly helpful in recognising the more subtle and complex aspects of the spiritual life. There are two particular applications of these guidelines. Firstly where one has sought to follow that which has seemed life giving and yet find this brings about a sense of desolation and alienation. This is often where deep and often subconscious inner attitudes and addictions have come into play, diverting as it were the movement of the spirit to serve other purposes. Looking back carefully and reflectively at the movements from the life-giving to the desolation can reveal these tendencies, enable the awareness of them and their effect and lead to prayer for grace to bring greater freedom from them and to make choices that take them into account. Secondly where one is facing a situation that might initially seem life diminishing and yet there is a deeper sense of life-giving purpose about following that path.

In the life of Jesus, Gethsemane is an example of the latter. Peter's proclamation that Jesus should not die, an example of the former. Without going into great detail, it is worth acknowledging this and inviting reflection – for those diminishing experiences – is there a sense that ultimately there is a positive outcome, or is the sense simply of destruction. Discerning this requires a freedom from the 'any suffering must be good for me' syndrome – something that comes from living with the foundation level of discernment and discovering its power.

This more reflective approach to life and faith looks under the surface of experiences to listen to the underlying movements of God. Some useful questions to aid this approach are:

- What has this experience done to my inner mood? Can I notice a greater sense of energy?
- Where do I sense this is leading? Is there a sense of life-giving energy even in the midst of difficult feelings or is it just death-dealing?
- If there is a sense of life-giving energy, is it apparent for whose sake this is about? Is there a sense of mutual generosity about it – i.e. it is for me and the purposes of God in my life or is it inherently about developing ones own personal empire.

Soul Spark: Session 5



Discernment

Within the context of the Spiritual Exercises discernment is not simply an individual activity, but one that is done in relationship with the person accompanying and guiding them. This is a vital perspective that brings us back to the sense of insecurity about personal discernment. Done simply in isolation, there is that nagging question – am I deluding myself? Bringing one's sense of discernment into the openness of a God-seeking relationship brings the potential for greater confidence in discernment.

This greater confidence comes in two ways:

sharing one's sense to another – takes it out of the realm of the private – and into the light which in itself refines the discernment.

the other person, may respond in ways that enable the discernment to be clearer, asking questions and reflecting back in ways that sharpen and aid the process.

In Soul Spark, the listening groups in Soul Spark provide the first of these way of bringing discernment into the light of the community of faith.

At the end of the course it is helpful to encourage participants to find a place to be listened to – whether in the formal context of Spiritual Direction, or in the context of a small group where the listening process is like that of the groups in the course.