Sermon at St John’s Evensong on Sunday 28th July 2019, ‘Discernment’

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer*

Words from Psalm 139, ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.’

The theme of tonight’s sermon, as we read and reflect on the Bible, is **Discernment**: recognising God in the pattern of our experience, and learning from the past, as we seek to open our eyes and discern God’s life-giving footsteps in our own. And it’s a theme that could not be more important, as we face complex decisions and challenges today, within a world that doesn’t offer us much, in the form of guidance – other than the mistaken idea that we can really have whatever we want, providing we try to minimise the suffering of other people…. what’s called the utilitarian principle, which essentially underpins our society today.

And our two readings tonight are all about such discernment; true discernment, as distinct from society’s live and let live attitude – learning from past experience, in particular the experience of the people of God, through whom God reveals his guidance and life-giving paths for our future.

And what’s startling, as we do this, is the realisation – not least through books like Genesis and Exodus – that God doesn’t reveals his ways through ideal god-like human beings (like some of the characters in classical Greek mythology) but rather through ordinary human failure and messy family life – warts and all. Yes God saves us, ultimately through entering our world, from within our messed up human lives, showing us the way through from sin to obedience, from division to wholeness, from spiritual blindness to sight. And the key, is discernment, learning from our experience (something we’re no longer encouraged to do, as it requires painful honesty and searing humility) listening, reflecting, noticing what is going on, what God is doing – even in our failures – as he painstakingly, like the stories of Joseph and his brother, and Moses and his people, draws us back to Him.

St Paul, in that cryptic passage from 1 Corinthians, explores precisely how our past experience, as a holy people, can help us. He uses the story of Israel to illustrate, warn and encourage his hearers in discerning the way of faith today. And Paul hones in on the paradigmatic story of Exodus and Wilderness wandering – Moses’ leadership of the liberated people of God – as a way of mapping out both the opportunities and pitfalls of following God’s footsteps, Christ always sustaining us like water from the rock, to supply our needs.
Paul’s sermon, his warnings from Israel’s history, on one level doesn’t make easy reading. For whilst many stayed the course, enduring whatever hardships they faced; others (Paul tells us) were tempted and gave in: some falling into sexual immorality, others into worship of idols. And Paul reminds us that how we treat our bodies and how we treat food and drink, including reverencing the sacred meal of the eucharist, really does matter. We are called to faithfulness. Therefore we are called to ‘flee from the worship of idols’, whatever form that idolatry may take.

However, underlying all of this – and our belief in a God who, in Jesus, is always merciful and forgiving – is the wisdom of discernment. Learning from the experience of the past both Israel’s, other Christians and our own, in order to open our eyes and journey into the kind of reconciled life and fullness, that God calls each one of us to.

So how reassuring then when, in Genesis 42, we meet not generalised types from the past – from the Exodus narrative, which informs Paul’s writing – but a real flesh and blood family in the form of Joseph and his brothers. And remember that this one family, the family of Jacob, torn, divided, full (at times) of pride, jealousy and hatred, isn’t just any family, but the central family of the Patriarchs upon whom God has sought to build his heritage, for all generations.

So if God can speak to us through an ordinary human family – which is essentially messed up – how much more can God take our own lives, fallen, finite, fallible, and lead us, through them, into the life-giving ways of his everlasting kingdom.

I know that Chris preached last Sunday, in depth, about the Book of Genesis, so I’m not going to rehearse the story of Joseph in detail tonight. But here Joseph’s brothers are sent by Jacob, in time of famine, to buy grain from Egypt. They meet Joseph, whose fortunes have been reversed and is now governor over all of Egypt, but they doesn’t recognise him. Joseph, then, teases them and tests them, as well as giving them grain... and we know that, much later, after having met them all and provided for them, Joseph will finally reveal his true identity, and forgive his brothers, who first sold him into slavery. How far God can redeem and transform our experience - even through hurt and failure - restoring us into abundant life. And it really is profoundly emotional, as we see God patiently healing, reconciling and restoring this hurt and divided family, upon whom so much will depend!

So how do we learn to discern God’s ways through our own experience today, learning – as we read the scriptures, which are all about the stories of God’s people – to see God at work, remoulding and directing us, in obedience to him?
Well I want to introduce, very briefly, another conversation partner, at this point, because he’s someone who has done more than anyone else – in Christian history – to guide us, in terms of spiritual discernment, and that’s St Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius was the son of a Basque nobleman, a soldier who fought and was injured in the battle of Pamplona in 1521. And during a long time of convalescence he was converted and at length determined to give himself wholly to God’s service. And what happened during this time, as he came to reading the life of Christ and the saints – whilst incapacitated, in his hospital bed - is that Ignatius noticed that whenever he dreamed about his former passions of military glory and the associated spoils, his emotions were fleeting, and ultimate desolate; but when he reflecting on Christ and the saints, his heart and feelings were filled with spiritual consolation and the graces of the Holy Spirit.

And this led Ignatius, as he went on to receive an education, study theology and teach, to formulate a theory, called the discernment of spirits, which underpinned his later Spiritual Exercises, so much used – across the wider Christian church – as a tool for spiritual growth and discernment today. Now sadly I’m not going to have time to unfold the whole of Ignatius teaching this evening – and some of you may be familiar with his Examen, and with his method of imaginative meditation of the Bible, or of elements of his Spiritual Exercises.

But let me conclude, as we see to open our hearts and our minds to God’s word, and to discern his steps in our own lives, with a very brief definition, which may go some way to opening up this exciting, down-to-earth, and ultimately rewarding work of discernment – learning to follow, day-by-day, where God is leading us:-

‘Discernment is the art of appreciating the gifts that God has given us and discovering how we might best respond to that love in daily life. It is a process of finding one’s own way of discipleship in a particular set of circumstances; a means of responding to the call of Christian love and truth – in a situation where there are often conflicting interests and values and choices have to be made. It is the gift be which we are able to observe an assess the different factors in a particular situation, and to choose that course of action which most authentically answers are desire to live by the gospel.’

So discernment is about listening to God, with our inmost ear, and noticing how God is speaking through our experience – as we reflect on his living word. It’s about noticing those things which give us life, and those things which are fleeting; and it’s about learning, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in prayer and daily living, to make those choices which are life giving... offering our gifts to God, and allowing God, over time, to heal and transform, and to bring us from darkness to light. So that, like Jacob and his family, and life Moses and the people of Israel, we can discern his footsteps in our own, God leading the people of Israel, like a shepherd and his sheep, into life-giving pasture.
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit Amen

In the intercessions:

Teach us, good Lord to serve thee as thou deservest,
  to give and not to count the cost;
  to fight and not to heed the wounds;
  to toil and not to seek for rest;
  to labour and not to ask for any reward;
except that of knowing that we do thy will. Amen.