

Things to Consider

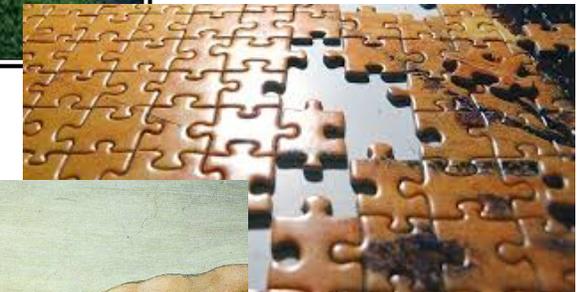
- ▶ There are times in life when we are struggling with an issue and discernment is called for. It is not a question of choosing between right and wrong, good and evil, but more of deciding between two goods. We feel that God is asking us to move one way, to choose one path, and we don't know which one. What to do?
- ▶ The first thing is to give ourselves some space and time. We are not talking here about matters that require an instant resolution. If we were, it would be asking God for urgent help, asking wisdom in the moment, and then making a decision.
- ▶ No. Here, we seek discernment for an important issue in a more leisured way that brings heart and mind together in a synthesis.
- ▶ We ask ourselves what questions need we ask concerning this matter that might help us clarify the issue as we seek to discern.
- ▶ St Ignatius of Loyola (1491[or 95]-1556), the founder of the Jesuits, said that issues for spiritual discernment are always questions with 'yes' or 'no' answers. This means, using our mind, we think carefully about the matter in hand, looking at all aspects, asking questions, finding relevant information to assist us and so on.
- ▶ Then we make a decision and we offer this to God in prayer: 'God, is this your will, yes or no?'
- ▶ Ignatius said that in asking this question we will always know the answer by the feelings we experience. He said that the Holy Spirit will always respond to our question by giving us feelings of consolation or desolation. Now we must wait patiently and listen for God's inner prompting of consolation or desolation.
- ▶ If we experience consolation we will feel a certain peace, a sense of freedom, a lightness of heart. It just feels right and there is perhaps a sense of joy accompanying it.
- ▶ If we were to experience its opposite – desolation – there will be no peace or joy, only a sense of darkness, a feeling of heaviness. We will feel somewhat troubled and ill-at-ease. It just won't feel right.
- ▶ He said that for a time consolation and desolation may alternate, but with time one will come to dominate.
- ▶ If we now feel a sense of consolation regarding a particular choice then we need to continue praying about it and asking a wise friend(s) for their discernment. In the next brochure I will consider the role of friends and Scripture in the discernment process.

AtG/B19/MBH

Attending to God

'Listening to God ... Discernment'

Part One



I think it would be true to say that most people would not be interested in seeking to do God's will. If anything that phrase 'doing God's will' would scare them, as if God would intentionally try to get them to do something that was not in their best interest! Others would be interested, provided that 'God's will' coincided with their own! No doubt at times we have all been like that!

In this brochure and the next I want to explore the theme of discernment: What is it and how to do it? Numbers of us would like to do it but are not sure where to begin or if so, how to continue. Does it mean that God now makes every decision in my life, even the smallest? And how do I know what God is saying anyway? Sometimes we might have heard someone say, 'God has told me to do (or say) this'. As we listen to them we are not at all sure that God has and we feel a little uneasy. We may have a sense that this is more their own inner voice than God's. So where to begin?

The first and important truth to notice is that God does not play games with us. He is serious about us and our well-being and is always respectful of us. He has our best interests at heart and so desires to work with us, encouraging us to become all that we might be.

Think of a parent and their child. They see all the potential, as well as the limitations within their child, and will encourage them to consider particular possibilities and try certain approaches. The illustration is not perfect, but God is the same. Knowing what is our best, He will encourage but will not force. You and I will then need to decide on our response.

As we live our life we will face times of making important decisions and the questions we ask ourselves are, 'What shall I do? Which way shall I turn? What path shall I choose? How do I respond?' And we have this feeling that God needs to be involved in this decision as it seems beyond us to decide.

As we reflect on this we realise there is a parallel with marriage. When a decision needs to be made we want our partner to be involved. We not only want their wisdom but their engagement with us, because we are partners in this together.

So the first thing we notice in all this is that we are deeply in relationship. This is not happening in a vacuum. True discernment is not about having a virtually non-existent relationship with God, not having spoken to Him in months, and then facing an issue and suddenly saying, 'God what do I do about this?' Good discernment assumes we are already in a living, ongoing relationship.

Of course this crisis of sorts may be the catalyst for developing on from a non-existent relationship and then the question above is a good first step. Otherwise we are like the young adult who only pops into Mum and Dad's life when they have a problem needing to be solved.

No matter. God is ever-patient and faithful, understanding that this process is always going to take time for us to learn just as it does with a child or teenager and their parents. We see this when God speaks to the boy Samuel in his sleep and three times Samuel then goes to Eli before Eli understands that it is God speaking to the boy (1 Samuel 3.2-10). God waits patiently for Samuel's return.

Like a parent, God will always have a bigger viewpoint. In the Book of Numbers when the Hebrews are in the wilderness having escaped from the Egyptians, much to the frustration of Moses they begin complaining that they are tired of the manna and want meat to eat. For Moses this is a 'jaw-dropping' moment and we are told that he complains to God saying there are not enough flocks, herds, or fish in the sea to feed the 600,000 people with him! (11.21-22) God offers a different solution than Moses could possibly have foreseen: quails that drop exhausted by their encampment, blown in by the wind from the sea. (11.31). God too, has a bigger viewpoint on our life than we can possibly have or imagine.

One final preliminary: In 1 Kings 3.9 Solomon prays to God asking for an understanding mind to discern between good and evil so that he may rule wisely. Today, we would understand discernment not so much as choosing good from evil, but choosing between two goods, one of which we believe to be the will of God for us. The question, for us is, which one?