

Soul Spark: Session 5



Called to become

Discernment is an important yet often neglected dimension of faith and spirituality. One of the crucial questions about any spirituality is how it helps discernment and informs the making of choices.

In this talk the importance of discernment in our choices is explored. Guidance based on Ignatius of Loyola's guidelines for the discernment of spirits is offered. These are looked at in the light of St Paul's fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.

Choice and Discernment:

- Life involves the responsibility of making choices. Taking this seriously needs discernment.
- The Incarnation implies that it is humanly possible to discern God's presence and will.
- Gerard Hughes reminds us 'God is in everything, closer to me than I am to myself. God is in every fact, every moment. Everything and everyone is sacred. Every bush is burning, if only we have the eyes to see.' (Gerard W Hughes, *God where are you?* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997) page 2)
- Discerning an incarnate God involves looking for the signs in our human senses; in the effect things have on us.
- Discernment is often substituted by guesswork, assumptions, presumption or groping in the dark hoping to get it right at some point! Alternatively, it is substituted with rules that makes you a slave to legalism. Discernment helps living out 'the glorious freedom of the children of God'.
- Discernment's key point of reference is the love of God. Adrian Plass reminds us that this is unconditional, even though "we are all ratbags... That's why Jesus died." (Adrian Plass, *Clearing away the rubbish* (Minstrel, 1988) page 11) Knowing the feeling of being loved by God unconditionally helps us recognise when we are being affected by other unloving forces.
- Recognising the inner effect of activities helps identify where the Spirit is moving. The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5) or their opposite may be noticed. This helps us to recognise where the Spirit is moving, and to

keep in step by making choices to co-operate with God. (The New International Version Bible uses the helpful 'keep in step with the Spirit' in Galatians 5.25)

Handling more complex discernment:

- There are times when we can be deceived. Something that can appear to be fruitful and life giving will slowly lead us away from moving with the Spirit and turn into the opposite. We see Jesus resisting this in his temptations.
- We can also be challenged by a call to make difficult or painful choices that in themselves don't feel fruitful, yet they lead ultimately to greater life and fruit. This is the way of the Cross.
- Useful questions to help sift out these possibilities are: Whose kingdom is this about? (the kingdom of God or the kingdom of me); Is this spider like or bee like? (These images come from Margaret Silf, *Landmarks* (Darton Longman and Todd 1998), chapter 8.)
- Tell a personal story of where struggling with discernment led to moving in faith and finding greater life