

Discernment in the New Testament

Author: Nicholas King SJ

Category: Spirituality and Catholic Life, The Jesuits



The writings of Ignatius of Loyola are not the only texts to which we can turn as we seek to understand and practise discernment. The authors of the New Testament, as they sought to explore what it meant for God to have revealed himself in Christ, had plenty to say about how we can discover where God is, and is not, at work in our lives. Nicholas King SJ identifies certain passages that can aid our Lenten study of discernment.

The pope is currently asking the Church to do something at which he and his Ignatian brothers and sisters are well-practised, namely to ‘discern’ or to listen where God is wanting to take us; and he is quite clear that this is no longer a matter of looking up the rule-books or consulting the list of previous papal utterances. The world needs something else from the Church today. That ‘something else’ is Ignatian discernment, to discover where the Spirit is leading; and it is not a magic formula. For what we have to remember is that self-deception is a constant danger in the area of spiritual discernment (which is why we should always have Ignatius Loyola’s Rules for the Discernment of Spirits ready to hand).

Some of the less frequently read portions of the New Testament may offer a bit of help here, as we might recognise in them many of the ideas that Ignatius would later bring together in those Rules. The Letter to the Hebrews is always worth a look, but people are rather frightened of it because of its weighty theology. Sometimes, too, they are a bit deterred by its tone of moral exhortation, and this is what you get in the following passage:

...we have much to say, and it is hard to express the meaning, because you have become lazy in your hearing. For you should by now be teachers; instead you need once more to be taught the ABC of God’s oracles; you have turned into people who need milk, rather than solid food. For everyone who partakes of milk is unacquainted with the teaching about what is right. Solid food belongs to those who are mature, those who because of their disposition have their faculties trained to discern good and evil. (Hebrews 5:11-14)

Discernment is not an easy matter, you see; and our task is to be aware that we are limited, and that we can get things wrong, and should not grandiloquently make claims to be discerning

individuals. For our discernment is always in danger of being self-interested, and without a certain spiritual discipline we shall fall into the trap.

Another New Testament work that is insufficiently studied is the Letter of James; whether this is because Luther thought it was 'an epistle of straw', I am not sure. But this author is full of sharp insights, often expressed with great humour. One thing that we have to learn is that there are ways of behaving that are good signs of which spirit we are listening to, and this is how James expresses it (3:13-18):

Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? [*And if you find yourself shouting 'Me! Me!', then look in the mirror*]. They are to prove it by their way of life, their deeds done in gentle wisdom. If you are possessed of bitter fanaticism and selfish ambition in your heart, then don't boast and tell lies against the Truth. None of this is the wisdom that comes from above: it is earthly, sensual, infernal. You see, wherever there is fanaticism and selfish ambition, there you get disorder and every kind of evil deed. Whereas the wisdom from above is, in the first place, pure, then peace-making, courteous, obedient, imbued with mercy and good fruits, unshakable, not faking it. The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace – for those who are doing peace.

We are all too inclined to think of ourselves as 'wise and knowledgeable', as able easily to discern what God wants, but there are clear criteria to check whether our approach is right: are we acting in 'gentle wisdom'? Or, on the other hand, is there 'bitter fanaticism and selfish ambition in us'? Is our way of proceeding leading to 'disorder and every kind of evil deed'? The spirits that we are called to discern can be immensely powerful, and we need to check whether we are indeed 'pure... peace-making, courteous', and the rest. What Ignatius of Loyola calls 'the enemy of our progress and eternal salvation' operates by 'disturbing the soul, depriving it of the peace, tranquillity and quiet that it had before' (*Spiritual Exercises* §333). It is, as so often with Ignatius, inspired common sense; but we need to keep coming back to it.

Then there are some interesting hints in the first letter of John, which is probably best taken as an attempt to deal with various errors of discernment in the aftermath of the Fourth Gospel. Against these errors, the author of the letter seems to be insisting on 'getting Jesus right' (what we might call 'discerning'), mainly by insisting on his humanity, and by obeying his command to love each other.

The texts are as follows:

This is how the children of God and the children of the Slanderer are identified: anyone who does not live a moral life is not of God; and likewise anyone who does not love their brother or sister. (1 John 3:10)

The underlying idea here is similar to Ignatius's thought about discerning which spirit is operational in a particular case ('Rules by which somehow to perceive and understand the various movements which are caused in the soul' – *Sp Exx* §313); in our passage the author believes that you can test the quality of life, especially whether there is love for other human beings.

And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love each other, as he gave us a commandment. And the one who keeps his commandments remains in him, and he in that person. This is how he we know that he remains in us, from the Spirit which he gave us. Beloved, don't believe absolutely every spirit. Instead, *test the spirits*, to see if they are of God, because many false prophets have come into the world. This is how you know the spirit of God: every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not of God. (1 John 3:23-4:3a)

Here the point is that it is essential to know which spirit is animating us on a particular question ('test the spirits'); and the 'love-command' is a good way of discerning the answer. The idea of 'remain', or 'stay', is one of immense importance in the gospel, and we can see it being given great weight here too. It is linked with the idea of 'mutual indwelling' in the gospel, which uses the same Greek root; and once you see it that way, it becomes clear what the different spirits are up to, not least in their attitude to Jesus.

No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, then God remains in us and God's love is made perfect in us. This is how we know that we remain in him and God in us, because he has given us [something] of his Spirit. (1 John 4:12-13)

Once again the key criterion, in this demanding situation where we cannot actually see God, is what you might call the 'love-test', which reveals the presence (or not) of the Spirit. In the New Testament world, it is clear, Christians did not need to be told about the Spirit; they experienced it powerfully. In our situation, that no longer seems to be the case for most people, and so we need the help of Ignatius's rules for discernment.

Then in the final words of the letter, as if it were summing up the whole document's teaching on the discernment of spirits, we read:

We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us discernment in order that we may know the True One. And we are in the True One, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the True God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from false gods. (1 John 5:20-21)

Like Ignatius, the author here goes back to the heart of what has been revealed – the coming of Jesus as God's son – and recognises that 'discernment' is not easy. But the basic criteria are: first, that we partake in the story of God; second, that we have unity with Jesus; third that we give proper place to the centrality of love; and fourth, that we assert the reality of Jesus's humanity and death. And what are the 'false gods'? They are all those created objects that we are tempted, again and again, to put in the place of the real God; they will always let us down, will lead us in the direction of slavery rather than freedom. And the discernment that is asked of us is the crucial ability to tell the difference.

Then there is the better-known passage from Galatians (5:19-26):

The *works* of the flesh are obvious. They are: sexual immorality, impurity, indecent behaviour, worship of other gods, drugs, states of enmity, situations of strife, fanaticism, rage, outbreaks of selfishness, situations of dissension, factionalism, spite, intoxication, partying, and things like that. I said it before, and I am saying it again: people who do such things are not going to inherit the Kingdom of God.

On the other hand the *fruit* of the spirit is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness [in contemporary Greek, this word, significantly enough, will have sounded like 'Christ-likeness',] goodness, faith, humility, self-control. There is no law against things like this...if we are living by the spirit, then let us also make the spirit our standard. Let us not become boastful; let us not provoke one another; let us not sow envy between us.

Now there are two things to remember here. First, Paul, in his battle with Galatian Christians, is making his distinction between 'flesh' (roughly humanity as closed to God) and 'spirit' (humanity as open to God). Secondly, It is significant that flesh has 'works', which has quite a negative sense in Paul, and especially in Galatians, where it is a substitute for responding to God's unconditional self-gift. Spirit, on the other hand, has 'fruit', which is a very different metaphor, capturing the fact that goodness multiplies (*'bonum est diffusivum sui'*, as Thomas Aquinas was prone to remark). And notice, too, that 'works' are plural, stressing the fissiparous nature of evil,

as opposed to the singular noun 'fruit', which emphasises the underlying unity of the good. Just contemplate that 'fruit', and see the fundamental beauty of it, and contrast that with the mood that was upon you when you wrote that last blog post that gave you so much pleasure, which absolutely destroyed (as you thought) those irritating opponents.

So what does the New Testament tell us about discernment, as we journey through Lent, a time when we might be expected to go in for some serious discernment? Well, look at the world that you live in; look at the ways in which you sometimes find yourself behaving, and check what we have already seen in our New Testament passages.

We have found certain positive signs, what you might expect to find in the presence of the spirit of God: mildness, wisdom, purity, peace, courtesy, obedience, being full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, not faking it, bringing about peace.

We have also seen some negative signs, which should give us pause when we encounter them in others or (more importantly) in ourselves: fanaticism, bitterness, ambitiousness, squabbling, boasting, lying, earthly things, the sensual, the demonic, confusion, evil deeds, wars, battles. These symptoms offer a clear indication that God is not at work.

You can easily think of places where those signs are to be met with today. If, as you read that last list, you find yourself muttering: 'That exactly sums them up, those bloggers/politicians/supporters of an opposing football team', then you may need to look again. Instead of reading it as a list of those of whom I disapprove, what I have to do is to use it as a way of checking the spirits, and especially the negative spirits, that are animating me on this issue or that.

Nicholas King SJ is a Tutor and Fellow in New Testament Studies at Campion Hall, University of Oxford.
