

We are easily led astray. This is as true now as in the time of Jesus. He touches here on a perennial problem – how do we know who to follow and the puzzle of how to exercise judgement and not exercise judgement, or so it seems. Do not judge and yet make a judgement – is this person leading me astray or should I follow them, trust what they are saying, believe it to be true. Sometimes words simply get in the way, but at other times can tell us exactly where another person is coming from. So there's a sort of primordial judgement being called for but how then do we guard against prejudice? What organ of judgement is Jesus calling into play in order to protect his flock. Ian McGilchrist will describe it in terms of intuition, instinct and imagination. In more religious language we might describe it as a discernment of spirits and the use of conscience – that moral sense of right and wrong which engages both spirit and mind. The problem is there just as much for the leader as for the ones he or she leads. The rule of St Benedict devotes a whole chapter to what an abbot should be like

*“In his teaching the Abbot ought always to keep to the apostolic rule; “Reprove, entreat, rebuke,” suiting himself to the occasion, appealing now to fear, now to gentle persuasion. Let him show the sternness of a master and the loving kindness of a father...(RB2)*

One can see the whole history of the Church written there, and of the image of God we hold- that tension of imagining God as a terrifying force out to get us or as one of total love always on our side. These of course are false dichotomies and if we go back to the Gospel passage we may see that it's not so much a matter of thinking it all through but of trust for

*“The disciple is not superior to his teacher, the fully trained disciple will always be like his teacher”*

So the primordial judgement to be made is whether we ourselves are Christ-like and that depends on Christ, on allowing Christ into our lives, to work the transformation that we cannot work for ourselves “Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief” - or “help me in my unbelief, in all the many times I seem to get it wrong, in my lack of trust. This calls for great humility and a recognition that the other person who we may think is in the wrong, who seems to challenge us in our rightness or righteousness, is just as human as we are – prone to fallibility, in need of grace, in need of God's judgement not as a force of ready condemnation, but as the possibility of love, of allowing that delicate space to be negotiated between us where this or that truth yields to a greater truth – that God is the only one who knows the full truth of what is going on here and it's in God, through Christ, that we are ultimately placing our trust. Get that right or allow God to get it right for us and all the rest follows including that tricky business of learning who to trust and who not to trust.

A man once came to our door threatening Dom Gregory with a knife. Dom Gregory responded, Would you like a cup of tea? The man was taken back, forgot about his first intention and said, “Yes, I'll have a cup of tea”.

I'd like to say that that's how the story ended- tea and no knife, the man disarmed by the unexpected invitation, but Dom Gregory also took the precaution of ringing the police while he made the cup of tea. Now that's discernment of spirits,” Reprove, entreat, rebuke suiting oneself to the occasion” – the man needed help just as much as did Dom Gregory. This is God working in us if we allow it.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour