

**Written Service:
Sunday 4th February 2024
Written by Rev. Richard Byass
and Marc Williamson**

DISCERNING DIRECTION:

I wonder how you chose what to have for breakfast this morning, or what you are wearing today?

I wonder how you chose where you live and what you do in your everyday life?

I wonder how we make choices about what is right and wrong and discern what it looks like to love like God?

I wonder how we make decisions about what is best for the future given our investment in the past?

Some choices are easy: Perhaps because they are relatively inconsequential, or because there is a clear “right” or “wrong”, or because there really isn’t a “right” or “wrong”.

Others are trickier because of the number of factors and the impact they have on ourselves and other people. At those times it would be really helpful if there were a giant sign in the sky or voice from the heavens that declared the way we should go.

In lieu of those things, today we will be considering what it looks like for us to seek God’s guidance as we discern the best way for us to journey faithfully as disciples in the way God would have us.

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Call to Worship: Psalm 25

Prayer for Guidance and for Deliverance -
Of David.

1-2a: To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

4-5: Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

6-7: Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O Lord!

8-10: Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

12-15: Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose. They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them. My eyes are ever towards the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

20-21: O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.

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Hymn:

Our opening hymn by James Edmeston draws upon the themes of Psalm 25. It calls in prayer on the three persons of God to journey with us as we seek to follow faithfully. May that be our prayer as we enter into this time of worship:

*Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
o'er the world's tempestuous sea;
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
for we have no help but thee,
yet possessing every blessing
if our God our Father be.*

*Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us;
all our weakness thou dost know,
thou didst tread this earth before us,
thou didst feel its keenest woe;
tempted, taunted, yet undaunted,
through the desert thou didst go.*

*Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
love with every passion blending,
pleasure that can never cloy;
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
nothing can our peace destroy.*

James Edmeston - STF 238

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Let us Pray:

Creator God - may you be found in this moment. As we bring ourselves, heart, mind and soul in search of you, maybe discover something more of what it is to be in relationship with you. Would you remind us of your goodness and grace, of your presence and provision, and inspire wonder at your generosity towards us.

Loving Son - may we worship in your footsteps. May this time see us

becoming more like you as we seek to honour the Creator with our worship. May we learn from you life, love with your heart, and meet the Father through you.

Spirit of Wisdom - may we hear you today. As we seek to worship in Spirit and truth may you guide us. May we be impassioned by your fire, emboldened by your light, and guided by your word from within.

AMEN

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Reading: 1 Corinthians 3: 9-17

9 For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13 their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. 14 If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. 15 If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved— even though only as one escaping through the flames.

16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

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Hymn:

Let's consider the words of the Keith Getty and Stuart Townend hymn "Speak, O Lord", using them as both prayer and invitation for God to direct us in our worship, thinking and steps:

*Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
to receive the food of your holy word.*

*Take your truth, plant it deep in us;
shape and fashion us in your likeness,
that the light of Christ
might be seen today
in our acts of love
and our deeds of faith.*

*Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
all your purposes, for your glory.*

*Teach us, Lord, full obedience,
holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
in the radiance of your purity.
Cause our faith to rise,
cause our eyes to see
your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail;
let their truth prevail over unbelief.*

*Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;
help us grasp the heights
of your plans for us.
Truths unchanged
from the dawn of time
that will echo down through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand
on your promises,
and by faith we'll walk
as you walk with us.*

*Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built
and the earth is filled with your glory.*

Keith Getty & Stuart Townend - STF 161

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Sermon

I'd like to start by offering the reading again in a different form...

1 Corinthians 3:9-17 (from The Message)

5-9 Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants, both of us—servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives to our mutual Master. We each carried out our servant assignment. I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow. It's not the one who plants or the one who waters who is at the center of this process but God, who makes things grow. Planting and watering are menial servant jobs at minimum wages. What makes them worth doing is the God we are serving. You happen to be God's field in which we are working.

9-15 Or, to put it another way, you are God's house. Using the gift God gave me as a good architect, I designed blueprints; Apollos is putting up the walls. Let each carpenter who comes on the job take care to build on the foundation! Remember, there is only one foundation, the one already laid: Jesus Christ. Take particular care in picking out your building materials. Eventually there is going to be an inspection. If you use cheap or inferior materials, you'll be found out. The inspection will be thorough and rigorous. You won't get by with a thing. If your work passes inspection, fine; if it doesn't, your part of the building will be torn out and started over. But you won't be torn out; you'll survive—but just barely.

16-17 You realise, don't you, that *you* are the temple of God, and God himself is present *in you*? No one will get by with vandalising God's temple, you can be sure of that. God's temple is sacred – and *you*, remember, are the temple.

How does that translation of the text feel in comparison? What does it spark in your mind?

For me it offers three things...

First it is about **Vocation**...

A man died and went to heaven, and St. Peter decides to show him around. He took him past several doors, St Peter opened one door and the sounds of praises rushed out, people shouting hallelujah and amen. "*These are the charismatic's*" said St Peter. They went on and St Peter opened another door and the sound of a wonderful liturgical service filled the air, clouds of incense spilling over the threshold. "*These are the Catholics*" said St Peter, and on they went. St Peter opened another door and the sound of laughter and conversations was heard, "*Baptists*" said St Peter. Soon they came to another door, but this one had signs all

around it saying "silence" and "do not enter". St Peter nodded knowingly... "*Methodists*" he said. "*They think they're the only ones here!*"

This life of faith is not about living in a religious bubble, but seeking the flourishing of all. That is about our calling which is individual; we are each called by God to respond as children of the living one the creator of all. It is about our calling which is communal; we are called as a community - the great company of the faithful every time - carrying the ways of Christ in this age as those who went before us did and as others will beyond us. We are called to gather - but it is not simply about the buildings we meet in - for we are the people of God - we are the temple. It is about our calling as part of the kingdom; we belong - not simply in this place but in the context of the saints of God in every time and place - it isn't simply about us - it is about the work of God which pervades every part of the created order in which we then participate... Each of us having our part to play to make up the whole - architect, designer, builder, carpenter etc... And that is in the here and now, as we have done, and as we are called to become, beyond now, as members of the kingdom - all of us together, and each one of us. All for God, and God for all. For God is Good, and God is for all!

It is also about **Reflection**... and that is also about the now, the next, and the not yet... It is about place, and about personhood - not going to a temple - but being *the* temple. It is about how we sit and think and about how we share the Good News - shining God's light; faith, hope and love into the world.

A little girl, dressed in her Sunday best, was running as fast as she could, trying not to be late for Bible class. She loved it - she never missed and always looked forward to learning about God... but one day she had overslept... so she was running... not wanting to miss a thing!

As she ran she prayed, '*Dear Lord, please don't let me be late! Dear Lord, please don't let me be late!*'

While she was running and praying, she tripped on a curb and fell, getting her clothes dirty and tearing her dress. She got up, brushed herself off, and started running again!

As she ran she once again began to pray, '*Dear Lord, please don't let me be late...But please don't shove me either!*'

When we think of the "now" inevitably we think of what has been - how we got here. Why has our attitude been? What has our demeanour led us to be like? (Note - not what we have done/ how active we are!). But as we consider what we are like/who we are, we also think about how we have reflected that into the world around us. When did we last have a conversation in which we didn't complain about *anything*?! (and especially anything related to the church!). If I were outside of the church and thinking about heading inside... what message would I want to hear? Have a look at the Methodist Website and see the good news stories, see the Evangelism and Growth strategy, the Justice seeking church policy, the Action for Hope report giving a response to the climate emergency, or the Methodist Way of Life, that this Circuit is exploring together... See the movement of God amongst us and join in - celebrate it. God is good and God is for all!

That speaks to the "next" - that is tasks in hand, yes the jobs still have to be done and duties fulfilled (to do lists *still* need ticking off...). But that can also be a challenge - how do we engage in this in such a way as to show that the kingdom we are joined to makes a difference in our lives and can do so again for others? God is good and God is for all!

It is of course also about the "not yet" - here our reflection is not simply about being a mirror - shining light into the world - but spending time in reflection... listening... sitting in the gap... the fancy theological word for that is 'liminality'! it is about being in 'in-between spaces' or thresholds - paying attention to the changes that we are on the precipice of and asking what God is saying - and, crucially, giving time to hear the reply so we can join in with it rather than running with our own preferences and passions. And God who calls us into that space offers us a moment of encounter to equip and enable us to follow where we are called. There we can know the wonder and excitement of our relationship with the living God, and so speak of it to others as an outcome of the experience; making sure that as many other people as possible can learn/ know/feel that too! It's not just pie in the sky when you die, it's cake on your plate while you wait! God is good, and God is for all!

Finally it is about **Commission**... That is sending - that act or action of being propelled out as agents and advocates for what it is that we believe and know in our relationship with God. We are the temple - God is with and within us; not where we are, but who we are. It is therefore about proclamation - though

not necessarily about placards and microphones - but rather 'as we go, discipling'. God is good, and God is for all!

As we are sent we take the very essence of the glory of God in our lives and in the midst of all creation; we are equipped, and we are called to a ministry of equipping - helping others to fulfil their potential so that they may flourish, thrive, fulfil their purpose. And we are gifted all that is needed - irrespective of stuff of the world - so that we can proclaim the goodness and grace and glory of God as we live our lives as the people of God. And ultimately what is that about? God is good, and God is for all!

But more - always more...

The Strait of Gibraltar is the strait that connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. On either side of the Strait of Gibraltar there are two mountains, which were known in ancient times as the Pillars of Hercules. According to Greek mythology, Hercules built these pillars to mark the edge of the world. Remember that in those days people believed that the earth was flat. The pillars bore the warning, "*non plus ultra*" / "*No More Beyond*" - cautioning sailors to go no further.

But in 1492 Christopher Columbus destroyed the belief that there was "no more beyond" when he sailed far out into the Atlantic Ocean and discovered the 'New World'. In the town where the explorer died, stands a monument commemorating him. On this monument there is a statue of a lion. The lion's paw is tearing away the word "No" from the phrase "*No More*

Beyond", making it read "*More Beyond*". Columbus had proven that there was "*more beyond*."

We are called to journey beyond our current place in the world. We are the temple... We are called to seek to live our lives beyond our current circumstances. We are called to live as people of God and people of hope. To live as those prepared to meet whatever the future holds and to make a difference in it.

A people with a vocation.
A people of reflection.
A people with a commission.

God's people.

God is good. And God is for all.

AMEN.

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Hymn:

The next hymn on our journey through this service is one that looks at the constant presence of God as we discern: It reflects on the ways God has historically blessed us and offers thanks; It highlights the ways we might still hear God directing us; It offers prayers for those who need to know discernment and direction; and it finishes by asking that we might be led to live for Christ alone.

*Lord, for the years
your love has kept and guided,
urged and inspired us,
cheered us on our way,
sought us and saved us,
pardoned and provided,
Lord of the years,
we bring our thanks today.*

*Lord, for that word,
the Word of life which fires us,
speaks to our hearts
and sets our souls ablaze,
teaches and trains,
rebukes us and inspires us,
Lord of the word,
receive your people's praise.*

*Lord, for our land,
in this our generation,
spirits oppressed
by pleasure, wealth and care;
for young and old,
for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land,
be pleased to hear our prayer.*

*Lord, for our world;
when we disown and doubt him,
loveless in strength,
and comfortless in pain;
hungry and helpless,
lost indeed without him,
Lord of the world,
we pray that Christ may reign.*

*Lord, for ourselves;
in living power remake us,
self on the cross
and Christ upon the throne;
past put behind us,
for the future take us,
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.*

Timothy Dudley-Smith - STF 470

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Let us pray:

We create space to speak to God, and to allow God to speak to us:

“Confession” means bringing those faltering steps we make, both consciously and unconsciously, to God. God takes the guilt and shame

that we carry from those moments and offers peace and forgiveness. From there we are re-commissioned to journey on in faith.

What are you bringing to God? Pay attention to the wonderful feeling of release as you consider the blessing “Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.”

“Intercession” means standing in the gap between Earth and Heaven. It invites us to bring the concerns we see and have for the world around us to God and seek for God to be seen in those situations and to show us how to live as disciples in the midst of those concerns.

What situations are on your heart locally? Further afield?

What is it that you are asking God to do in those situations? What can you do, if anything, to bring God’s love, hope, peace or joy into these issues?

Pay attention to your emotions. Even if we don’t know what to pray for, the Spirit can pray on our behalf by translating the groans of our hearts.

To “petition” is to seek and ask things of God. We have done some of that in intercession. But particularly pertinent to this service: What direction are you, those you love, and those you are in community with trying to discern in life at the moment?

Ask God to show the way. As you pray, look for signs of peace with different options. Perhaps share your discernment journey with others you trust.

Finally, the following is a prayer that has its roots in the Lord's Prayer:

Our God, who is present in this earth and beyond our space and time, may your name - and everything it stands for - be honoured.

May we see your heart and purposes for your created people to thrive and be a reality in our world as you imagined it might be. May we see all people understand what it means to live and love as you would have us too, in this life, not just in the life to come.

We humbly ask you for all that we need, trusting in you to provide and sustain.

We claim your generous forgiveness for the ways we fail to live and love as people made in your image, and we ask for you to give us the strength to forgive those who don't honour you in their interactions with us.

May the paths we choose be guided by you. May they bring glory to you and your gospel love to those we meet.

May we be driven by your heart and not act out of selfish ambition. May our lives be guarded by, and reflective of, your goodness.

We ask this because of the faithfulness of your creative vision, your loving-kindness and your whole being.

We will sing and shout of your goodness and glory now and always.

AMEN

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Reflection:

In his book "Silence and Honey Cakes", Rowan Williams says this (p. 104):

"So what does discernment look like? I have to choose between a number of courses of action: well, what course of action more fully seems to resonate with the kind of life Christ lived and lives? What course of action opens up more possibilities for God to 'come through'? These are not questions that will immediately yield an answer, but they are the raw material of reflection. What course of action might be slightly more 'in tune'? What opens rather than closes the doors for God's healing and reconciling and creating and forgiving work to go on? There's no guarantee that in any situation there will be only one clear and compelling answer to such questions.

But, if these are the questions we're asking, the very process of reflecting and discerning is making space in ourselves for the life of Christ and the creative movement of God. To the extent that we truthfully and sincerely make that space, we are already in tune a little bit better with God; so even if we go on to make a mistake, we shall have done something to leave open the door to God in the decision we made. And so we shall have moved some way towards doing God's will by leaving God some room and freedom to salvage our lives from whatever mess our decisions may bring with them."

