

## **Discernment**

East Ontario, Holy Trinity and St. Mary's

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(Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20)

*Holy God, may only the truth be spoken and only the truth heard. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

How do Christians decide what's true, what we should believe, what choices we should make, what we should reject and refuse?

Late Isaiah speaks to Judah during a time when the people think they've got it right, but apparently they're still getting it all wrong. God says, "Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins." We brace for the usual religious judgements on the usual suspects. But in this case, God isn't confronting so-called *Godless* sinners, but *Godly* sinners! "...day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God," the LORD says. So, just so we have a glimpse of back story here: these words are spoken when a small remnant of the Judean people has survived 70 years of exile in a foreign superpower (Babylon). The people now passionately keep the rules of Moses in hopes of warding off another catastrophe. But something isn't right, and it might remind us of our own national and global Church in-fighting.

“Look,” God charges them, “you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” God’s charge here isn’t just about fasting. Go back to Isaiah 1, and you’d be struck with how the very things Moses himself commanded—burning incense, solemn assemblies, loud music, burnt sacrifices—all these things written in the scriptures as rules of God, *God declares through Isaiah to be a burden and an offense to God because justice, goodness, and a pure heart have been forsaken in the process.*

So, back to my question: How do we Christians decide what’s right? Isn’t the whole point of the scriptures to give us firm truths and rules? But how is it possible for those very truths and rules to become a system of rebellion against God?

Let’s step back here a bit. Rules are making a bit of a comeback today. Back in the ’80’s and ’90’s Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans, and Presbyterians and others were taking a shining to each other and trying to overlook old disputes. But by 2010 efforts toward full communion fell apart. New battle lines were drawn over the ordination of women and inclusion of LGBTQ+ Christians. Christians as holy and devout, committed to scripture and tradition, can disagree strongly on what’s right and what’s wrong when it comes to these questions.

How do we know what's right?

Thing is, Jesus doesn't make it easier. He doesn't give us a tidier conservative or liberal system for defining the rules. If anything, he makes it harder. Now, I know some of you feel Jesus came not so much to save us from sin as to save us from the Old Testament, but here this again: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." Okay, but he fulfills in a kinda sorta spiritual way that also makes all the old rules and tall-tales old news, right? "...whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven..." And all God's Beatles-era flower-children said, "Heyyyy, Jesus, we thought you were cool, maaan!"

But, hold on, Jesus still goes on to make a new covenant in his own blood, that opens his way to his Father to all people; and, more dramatically, by his resurrection he proves himself the Creator-God, the God of Israel, incarnate as God-with-us, a human. Moses and Elijah would have found God-with-us as a human, a major heresy. And in Acts, Peter receives from the Holy Spirit a vision to eat food declared unclean in the scriptures, which Jesus' new covenant makes clean by the cleansing-power of his blood.

So, how can it be that Jesus, in one sense changes everything, and in another sense, according to this saying, changes nothing?

He gives us a hint. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Here’s the point today. Our righteousness never exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees—and you can include priests and professors in there—if we never stop looking for a code-book rather than listening constantly *for God’s living voice*. That code book could be a Conservative ideology, a Liberal ideology; it could be something more technical like the Book of Alternative services and the laws of our Diocese or even the outlook of your priest!

When it comes to the Bible, it amazing to think how many people in the stories didn’t have the Bible. The God who called the people of Israel, wasn’t a book or even a temple, but an active God. The same God incarnate as Jesus isn’t a set of letters or a creed, but those letters and creed witness to him as a living, moving divine person. The Bible inspired of God, the ancient Temple commanded by God. But listen. We are forever helpless to capture the truth of it all. We are little created persons in living relationship with the divine Person, God. Being in living relationship with God *is the point*. Every relationship requires a lot of listening and a lot of open communication.

So: how do you come to know what's right? Answer: it might not even count as "knowing." It amounts to a spiritual listening and following, while paying attention to every word in the scriptures and every moment in life.

In our tradition it's called *discernment*. Discernment alone is the way of knowing when truth is the life of us little created persons in relationship with a big, unsearchable divine Person. Truth isn't an eyeball to dissect or a riddle to solve. Truth is a life to live. It's a life to live in relationship with our Creator, each other, and creation. We must learn to listen to God—to *discern*. That looks like attending to the scriptures, every word. And it looks like to attend to life, every moment—the events, the feelings, the people, the problems, the joys, the needs, the opportunities and barriers of our days: it's all soaked through with the silent voice of God. We need to consult our wise and godly friends, wait patiently for answers, try something, see what works, and what doesn't, listen to people with different experiences, get comfortable with the discomfort of not having all the answers.

There's a saying: we make plans and God laughs. The same might be true with rules. We make rules and God laughs. It's not that God has no plan or that God does not know right or wrong. It's that God creates what's right, even when it challenges or illudes our understanding. The main problem with rules, is that we want them so we don't have to listen to God anymore. A code book is easier to handle than an Almighty God. Truth isn't all about knowing the right rules, it's

about living by every word that comes from the mouth of God, every word written in the scriptures, and every word unfolding in the moments of created life.

As we approach the season of Lent, I urge you to observe Ash Wednesday, and to create a Lenten discipline – which in fact is to create some temporary rules. Ash Wednesday is a re-commitment to a close walk with God, and a new refusal of things that get in the way of that. You come to Ash Wednesday, reflect, say the prayers of repentance, and it's a like making a list for the Spring cleaning of your life. You consider what might be blocking your ears to God, and go, “Oh man I've got impatience in this ear; I've got discontentment in this ear; I've got pride in this ear; I've got bitterness in this ear; I've got too much sugar in this ear; I've got a real lack of self-control in this ear; I've got worry in this ear; I've got a little too much booze in this ear; etc. etc.”

We need to learn to listen. The rest will come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.