

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 23, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

Finding God's Will in the Obvious

Isaiah 8:23-9:3

Psalm 27

1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17

Matthew 4:12-23

One of my favorite stories about Saint Ignatius of Loyola took place shortly after he became a Christian. The Jesuit priest, William Barry, in his book, Letting God Come Close, tells the story of Saint Ignatius' first experience with discerning God's will. He writes—

Right after [Ignatius] left Loyola to take up his new life of following Jesus, he and a Moor met on the road, both riding mules. They began to converse, and the conversation turned to the topic of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Moor could well imagine that Mary had conceived Jesus without the benefit of a man, but he could not agree that she was a virgin after giving birth. Ignatius tried to dissuade him from this opinion, but could not succeed. The Autobiography tells us that the Moor raced on ahead of Ignatius. We can imagine that the Moor felt Ignatius getting more and more irate.

After the Moor left, Ignatius began to have misgivings about his behavior; perhaps he had not done enough to uphold the honor of our Lady. The desire came over him to race after the Moor and strike him with his dagger, but he couldn't make up his mind. He couldn't discern what to do, in other words, and he was in an agony of indecision. Finally, in desperation, he decided to let the mule make the decision for him. He let the reins go slack. If the mule followed the broad road to the town to which the Moor was heading, Ignatius would seek him out and strike him; if the mule kept to the road he was on, then he would let the Moor go. The mule kept to the road he was on. Obviously, Ignatius did not immediately become a master of discernment.¹

By the end of his life, Saint Ignatius of Loyola had mastered the skills of discerning God's will and had even come up with a set of principles to guide others in their discernment. During Lent this year, we are going to have a series of spiritual formation days that will cover in greater depth Ignatius' principles for discernment. Today, however, I am going to share with you a small part of Ignatius' suggestions.

Saint Ignatius points out that we can sometimes use our gift of *reason* to logically understand what it is that God might want us to do. Another way of saying this would be— **we can sometimes know God's will through simply looking at what is *logically obvious*.** Therefore, discernment usually begins with gathering as many of the obvious facts and details as possible. Just by being aware of what is obvious and logical, we can sometimes know what it is that God wants us to do. Our Gospel reading today gives us a beautiful example of this idea. In it, Jesus did what was *obviously reasonable* and *logical* given the historical context and situation.

¹ Barry, William. *Letting God Come Close*, Loyola Press, 2001, pg. 117-118.

In chapter four of Matthew's Gospel, we read about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He made the decision to leave His hometown of Nazareth and journey to Capernaum in northern Galilee. At the time of Christ, Israel was divided up into three regions. The southern region was known as Judea and among its cities were Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The middle region was known as Samaria. The upper region was known as Galilee and included Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. To begin His public ministry, Jesus chose to start in the northern part of Galilee, around the Sea of Galilee, which the author of the Gospel of Matthew understood to be a fulfillment of chapter eight in the book of Isaiah.

In the beginning of the book of Isaiah, we are told that the "land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali," near the "seaward road," in the land of the "Gentiles," would see a great light and experience great joy.² In actuality, the place that Jesus went to start His ministry—Capernaum—was at the far eastern edge of the land of Zebulun and Naphtali and was actually by the Sea of Galilee, not the Mediterranean Sea, which the prophet Isaiah referenced. Regardless, Capernaum would have been the logical place for Jesus to start His public ministry based on the people's understanding of the book of Isaiah.


In addition to the prophetic word in Isaiah about northern Galilee, there are several other logical reasons for Jesus choosing that region to begin His new ministry. First, it was a highly populated area. Because of its unbelievably fertile soil, many people lived in northern Galilee. The famous historian, Josephus, wrote that there were 204 villages with no fewer than 15,000 inhabitants each in Galilee.³ This would have provided Jesus with a large crowd with whom to share His message.

Northern Galilee was also one of the great crossroads of the Roman Empire. Therefore, it was made up of many different types of people with many different religious and political backgrounds. It, therefore, had a reputation of being more open to new ideas than many other places. The Scripture scholar, William Barclay, explained this, writing, "The natural characteristics of the Galileans, and the preparation of history had made Galilee the one place in all Palestine where a new teacher with a new message had any real chance of being heard."⁴

Lastly, the people of northern Galilee had a reputation of being quick to *courageously* follow new leaders. Josephus pointed this out, writing that the people of Galilee "have never been destitute of courage," and that, "cowardice was never a characteristic..." of them.⁵ Not only was northern Galilee a logical place for Jesus to find men and women open to the Good News, but it was also a logical place to find people who would courageously and passionately be His disciples.

No one perfectly discerns God's will, but rather, it is a skill that we cultivate and develop throughout our lives as our relationship with God grows and matures. Saint Ignatius of Loyola and our Scripture readings this weekend remind us that doing God's will almost always begins with what is most obvious. This week, I encourage us to take the time to gather the obvious and logical information and details about the things that we've been discerning in our lives and to share it with God through prayer. This is always a better approach than leaving up to a mule!

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

 Read Psalm 119:125-176. What do these verses teach us about discernment?

² Isaiah 8:23-9:3

³ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew*, The Daily Study Bible Series, Vol. 1, pg. 72.

⁴ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew*, The Daily Study Bible Series, Vol. 1, pg. 74

⁵ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew*, The Daily Study Bible Series, Vol. 1, pg. 72.