

3rd Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

An Introduction to Discernment

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11
Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

When most of us think of “discerning God’s will,” we think of *big* decisions in life. We want God’s answers to questions like, “What do You want me to do with my life?” “God, do You want us to start having kids?” “God, do You want me to have this particular job?” While these are important questions to discern, they are not the *starting place* for learning discernment. Discernment should begin on a much more simple and elementary level; it should ideally begin with our growing in an awareness of what is going on in our body, mind and soul, which we heard about in our second reading today from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians.

May the God of peace make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

-1 Thessalonians 5:23

In this short verse from Saint Paul, we are given a beautiful Christian anthropology that has numerous important implications, such as providing a framework for inner healing ministry, laying a foundation for the theology of Purgatory (which I preached on in August), and offering a starting place for understanding discernment, which will be our focus this weekend.

In the New American Bible translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:23, we find the words, “spirit, soul, and body,” however, a translation of this Christian anthropology that I like better is the Phillips translation, which reads—

May the God of peace make you holy through and through. May you be kept in *soul and mind and body* in spotless integrity until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (*emphasis mine*).

Let’s look briefly at what these three Greek New Testament words mean. The first word in this passage is πνεῦμα {pnyoo'-mah}, which is translated “spirit” in the New American Bible, but “soul” in the Phillips translation. I prefer the word “soul,” since it indicates the vital principle by which the body is animated and the power by which the human being feels, thinks, and decides.

The second word is ψυχή {psoo-khay'}, and is translated “soul” in the New American Bible, but “mind” in the Phillips translation. Once again, I prefer the Phillips translation since the mind is the seat of the feelings, desires, affections, aversions and the place of right use of the aids offered it by God.

Lastly, we have the word σῶμα {so'-mah} which is translated “body” by both the New American Bible and the Phillips Bible. In the context of this particular Scripture passage, σῶμα is referring to the human body.

Saint Paul is explaining to the Thessalonians, and now to all of us, that we, as human being, are made up of body, mind, and soul. These three fundamental elements of our humanity provide material for us to discern; in them, we can begin to “hear” God’s voice and see His will unfold. I like to use the analogy of a car in order to help explain how this works. The origin of “power” in a car is the engine (soul). The “seat of right or wrong use” and discernment of direction is the driver (mind) and the body is the vehicle parts (body).

The engine, vehicle parts, and driver all provide constant input to the driver who must discern the input and make the appropriate response. For example, if there is a knocking sound coming from the engine and a noticeable loss of power, then the driver has been given some good “material” for discernment—there might be an engine problem. Or, if the steering wheel is vibrating badly at high speeds, the driver should pay attention, recognizing that there is a problem; choosing to discern the problem and act accordingly is important. Not only do the engine and body parts of the car provide input, so does the driver! If a driver is overly exhausted, he or she has to correctly respond to that input or else it could be dangerous to drive.

In a similar way, the body, mind, and soul gives us a lot of material for discernment and can help us to see how God is at work in our lives and what He desires for us. The σῶμα (body) provides material for discernment through such things as: physical desires, physical appetites (i.e. hunger, thirst, sexual urges, etc.), fatigue, rest, satisfaction, weight, health/sickness, and the aptitude of the senses. The body sends this information to the mind, which then has to discern the meaning and how God might be at work in us, and then make the proper response.

The ψυχή (mind) also provides material for discernment as it is the home of thoughts, memories, feelings, non-spiritual consolations and desolations, emotional wounds, habits, inclinations, and intellectual desires. Life would be dangerously out-of-control if you and I simply *accepted* all of the different thoughts and feelings that passed through our minds. We see examples of the danger of this in the numerous incidences of impulsive violence in our world. Instead, we are challenged to discern these movements and understand how God is at work in them.

The πνεῦμα (soul) also provides material for discernment. It is the place of affective spiritual movements, spiritual consolations and desolations, and spiritual desires. As our minds receive all of this input, we discern it (sifting through it), looking for clarity in how to respond. The more that you and I become aware of what is going on in our body, mind, and soul, and prayerfully discern how God is at work in it, how He is using it to draw us to Himself and how Satan is trying to use it to lead us away from God.

After the 10:30am Mass Sunday, in the dining facility here at I.C., I will continue this homily with an hour presentation offering some more specific details on how these various aspects of our humanity—body, mind, and soul—provide input for discernment and how they can affect things like our intercession for other people, overcoming sin, and finding inner healing. There will be free babysitting available in the nursery and free snacks available. I will audio record the presentation and upload it to my website for those who cannot attend.