

Discerning Church: Week One

Intro: Naming the issue

For a few years now the question of whether the church can include people from the LGBT+ communities has been a live one, (a hot topic) in the Western church. About 18 months ago the eldership at ABC agreed that we should look at the issue as a whole church family and so, most of you will know, we took our time and through 2022 we hosted a course about how to help ABC to at least be a 'safe' place for LGBT+ people. We undertake some Bible studies on what we see as the key Bible passages on the issue – to dig down on them and try and grapple with what they say looking at contrasting interpretations of the same passage (if you haven't done this before I would encourage you to look at these). We also made space to discuss together and encouraged wider discussions in groups and communities and finally we looked at what might practically change were we to welcome those from the LGBT+ communities fully into church life. And in all this the elders have been discussing and praying as we have gone along.

The resources we have used at are all available and in fact we shall be emailing them out again later this week to everyone, so if we haven't got your email address please use the sign-up sheets at the back and we'll make sure you'll get a copy.

Next month – we have the opportunity to finally make a decision on if and how we welcome and include LGBT+ people in the same way we would welcome anyone else into the life of the church. And this is what I want us to look at over the next few weeks. How the church makes decisions together, on this or any other important matter. And as an evangelical and charismatic church, these matters are not simply academic to us.

The story we will look at (in part) this morning, is the story of Jesus healing the blind man in John 9. And as we pick up the story Jesus has already healed him, rubbing mud into his eyes – job done you might think. But now a furore ensues where a debate rages about how the miracle occurred and who Jesus is.

John 9:13-41

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to

the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' ²⁰ His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' ²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³ Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' ²⁵ He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' ²⁶ They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' ²⁷ He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' ²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' ³⁰ The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' ³⁴ They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' ³⁶ He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' ³⁷ Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' ³⁸ He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

Opening

You will doubtless be aware that this story in John 9 operates on more than one level. The physical blindness of this man is a metaphor for spiritual blindness of the religious leaders.

The physical healing takes up just a few initial verses, whereas the major part of the story is the discussion which ensues afterwards.

There are questions here about [sin](#).

Initially the disciples ask Jesus (we didn't read this earlier part)

'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

Then later the same question is raised about Jesus. In verse 24 the Pharisees say about Jesus, **'We know that this man is a sinner.'**

This matter is one which has caused [division](#).

16 Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided.

So let us be aware of the uncomfortable truth that Jesus was one whose life and words divided opinion.

There are also questions here about [witnesses and evidence](#).

So witnesses are brought in to give evidence and clarify what has happened, but the parents seem too scared about what might happen to say much, (perish the thought that people might be too scared to say what they really thought about the LGBT+ conversation).

Which leads to question about [fear](#) regarding what people might say.

The healed man's parents remain very non-committal for fear that they say the wrong thing.

We also find a sharp contrast between how people [approach](#) this situation.

In fact all the way through a tension exists between the individual involved and the wider question at stake. The pharisees are most focussed on the wider question, the theology which is at stake, whereas Jesus remains focussed on the individual. Love and Law seem to sit in an uncomfortable tension.

Finally there is, after all is said and done, a [transformation](#) at the heart of the story.

The blind man who was healed speaks and says:

'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.'

He seems to cut through the fog of questions and opinions and reminds people of the end result of what this man Jesus has done for him.

(So this story seems to have many of the elements of the ways in which this question of LGBT+ inclusion is thought about and talked about; **sin? division, witness & evidence, fear, means of approach, transformation.**

The **Pharisees** are blind – so absorbed are they with how they read the Law. The **disciples** themselves are blind – even these close followers can't see how Jesus sees. But **Jesus** can see. And also, cutting through all the debate, the **blind man** is able to see as well.

The ultimate point for me in this story is the classic discipleship questions: **'What is God doing in this situation and how can I get on board with it?'**

The way in which people make decisions varies around the world. In broad-brush terms we find that:

The **United States** and **Germany** have a very top-down and hierarchical approach to decision-making; although they are a bit quicker about decision-making in United States and in Germany's individualistic culture the decision-maker is likely to take great responsibility for their decisions.

Go to **Scandinavia** and decision-making is much more by consensus. This takes a long time but because of all the discussions that have taken place once a decision is made is unlikely to be reversed.

Japan is similar in their desire to maintain the well-being of the whole group, something which matters more than individual choice. (So the traditional way of reaching consensus in Japan is where an individual presents a document stating their case, which is circulated and those who agree stamp the document and those who don't either don't stamp the document or put their stamp upside down.)

Arab cultures are also, generally speaking, risk averse and hierarchical. Honour and reputation are key and nepotism, or personal connections, play a significant role.

Of course within the church, over time, different ways to make decisions have held sway and in broad terms three forms of power or decision-making have emerged.

1. **Episcopal** – the heads of the church, bishops and archbishops have responsibility for the most important matters.
2. **Presbyterian** – where the leaders of the church have the greatest decision-making powers.
3. **Congregational** – where the important matters are determined by the while church gathering at a church meeting and deciding together.

I say important matters, but you would be surprised by how much decisions about what colour to paint the kitchen, or which new hymn book to buy, have animated discussions at church meetings over the years.

Baptists are congregational. Although there isn't a Baptist 'statement of faith' there is a declaration of principle which explains how we make decisions.

That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.

Our constitution explains in more detail that each church interprets and administers God's laws through gathering its members together in church meetings or gatherings.

Most Christians in the world are under an **episcopal** model; (e.g. bishops in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, although Pentecostal churches have bishops as well). The second most practiced method is **presbyterian** and I have seen almost every new-church I can think of – Pioneer, Vineyard, New Frontier etc. adopt a presbyterian model. **Congregational** governance is the least practiced method of church governance

Although none of the churches I know practice their model in a 'pure' form

- Bishops sound out their vicars and priests.
- Leaders consult their congregations.
- Baptist ministers, and leadership teams have lea-way to make some decisions themselves

Personal style as well as **theology** come into play in determining which model you prefer. If you want to get things done quickly – a hierarchical episcopal model may suit you best. If you want something which is more collegiate and you're less inclined to make decisions on your own, perhaps the congregational approach is more 'you'.

But even as Congregationalists I sometimes wonder whether we really understand what this means when it comes to how we 'make-decisions'. That when it comes to discernment we are more likely to be a see our part as something akin to going home, having a pray and think about the issue, then coming to the meeting and casting our vote.

Are we really discerning people? Do we know what discernment entails?

All I want to do now is to provoke some questions in our thinking – questions I hope we might answer in the next few weeks. Questions about our discerning together.

First up...

1. Are we making a decision or are we discerning?

We call it a 'discerning process', but in our minds is it just decision-making where:

- Focus is on the outcome – rather than the process
- Focus is on us, rather than the one who is beyond us.

2. Do we do it alone or together?

There's a pretty active and lively debate between the different characters in our story from John 9. But, as I've already asked, are we more likely to go home and have a pray and think about it on our own. We decide we don't want to hear what is being said and absent ourselves from discussions. Yet in doing so we deny ourselves the opportunity to hear what others think and equally deny others the opportunity to hear from God through what we say. I have been surprised at some who I think would strongly state they are Baptist in their conviction and yet have chosen to absent themselves from the conversation.

3. Do we recognise the many factors beyond 'Word and Spirit' that might shape our thinking?

- Our past experiences
- Our intellectual ability
- The culture we exist in, which morphs and changes with each generation
- Our personality

4. Are we able to maintain sight of the person or do they become lost behind the issue?

Wonderfully, the Gospel stories show us that Jesus always maintained sight of the person, even when dealing with the most gnarly and complicated issue. We saw this in John 9, but also find it with the woman at well, the rich young man – and classically with woman caught in adultery.

5. Do we address questions by watching and listening or by just talking?

Where is the place silence, listening, being passive in discerning?

Do we pray?

In John 9, watching and listening to what goes on seems important.

6. Is our decision-making is about sifting options 'a, b & c' and deciding which one best fits, or...?

Let me schmaltz you for a moment. ABC you are really able and intelligent bunch. Clever, educated, intelligent, resourceful. Great at thinking things through. BUT! Discernment requires that we let go of our own abilities and open it up to the possibility that the answer lies beyond us and God wants to lead us to something we have never before considered.

Time and again in my Christian life I find that my instinct is to choose between options 'a' and 'b' and then God comes up with option 'c' about which there are two characteristics

- i. I had never before considered this idea
- ii. It wipes the floor with the options I had come up with

7. Is decision making the same as a democracy?

Does the most popular option win? Quite frankly, no! We are not having a referendum here, church discernment is not BREXIT, it's not about winners and losers.

Sadly I have seen discernment abused in church, (even in *my* time in *this* church). In one important decision someone rung up and cajoled their friends to attend in order to pass the vote 'their way'. That is a complete travesty of what we are trying to do. It is about God's will not ours.

I used to think that the way that Judas Iscariot was replaced by a new disciple was, err, a bit flaky. It is recorded in Acts 1:23

23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

But what this magnificently shows us is that in drawing lots, they were utterly dependent on God for the answer.

8. Are we automatically discerning of God's ways?

The Gospels give us lots of examples of how Jesus' followers got it wrong. They made assumptions, they imposed their culture or beliefs, or operate above their pay-grade.

- Let the children come to me (Matthew 19)
- Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? (Matthew 12)
- Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory (Mark 10)
- 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?' (John 18)

I guess the general principle that when I read the Gospels I am much more likely to act like the disciples than I am to act like Jesus might be a helpful check here. Our default is that we stop the children coming, we don't see who our mother or brother or sister are, we clamour for power and recognition and we cut off the ear of those who would thwart us.

So there is a **whole list of questions** about the discernment process. Questions which, as I said, I hope we address in some way in the next few weeks. But as I close let me read some final words from Henri Nouwen.

Christian discernment is not the same as decision making. Reaching a decision can be straightforward: we consider our goals and options; maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice; and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively. Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God's desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.

Discernment reveals new priorities, directions, and gifts from God. We come to realize that what previously seemed so important for our lives loses its power over us. Our desire to be successful, well liked and influential becomes increasingly less important as we move closer to God's heart. To our surprise, we even may experience a strange inner freedom to follow a new call or direction as previous concerns move into the background of our consciousness. We begin to see the beauty of the small and hidden life that Jesus lived in Nazareth. Most rewarding of all is the discovery that as we pray more each day, God's will—that is, God's concrete ways of loving us and our world—gradually is made known to us.

Henri Nouwen *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*

Prayer