

How to Construct a Discerning Life

Viv Thomas

We are slowly drowning being sucked under weighed down by images and data. We are being flooded by cascading amounts of information about us and in us. More and more information is gurgling through our heads, hearts and lives than any generation before. We now have the ability to know something about almost everything but our crisis is that, even with all our information and data, we are losing our capacity to live. We are alive yet numbed at the same time. Our data swamp has helped us participate in an exponential increase in cleverness, but a catastrophic collapse in wisdom.

We know much about the techniques of living. We know how to make money. Don't spend it unless you have to and keep investing the excess if you have some. We know about the techniques of romance. Pay attention, focus and find our partner's love language. We know how to get what we want. Set your goals, work hard, network and don't quit. Yet, we have forgotten how to live. We have forgotten how to build our lives through wisdom and have settled for developing quick and clever techniques to get us through. How can we avoid drowning in information so we can float in wisdom? What can move us on from this crisis? The answer is one word - discernment.

What do I mean by discernment? It is the ability to separate, sift and distinguish so that we can be all God has intended us to be. Jesus talked of this discernment using a startling phrase when he said, 'Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.'¹ He was saying be wide awake but pure and be 'switched on' yet without guile. Here Jesus puts together two powerful, yet beautiful images of a discerning person - be a snake and be a dove. You do not learn how to become a discerning 'snake-dove' by accident. You have to be trained in one way or another.

Does it matter if I am not a discerning person? The cost can be high if you do not pursue a discerning life. You borrow money when you can't pay it back, you enter into relationships that end in train wrecks, you grasp for things that should be let go and you can imagine things are real when they are just passing daydreams. I have done all of these things at one point or other but never all at once, yet, thank you God. John was an unmarried Priest I knew a few years ago. He was quite discerning. In our conversations I asked him how he dealt with sexual temptation. He said, "I pray." "What do you pray?" I asked. He said, "well, when it comes to sex there are times when I have the opportunity and there are times when I have the inclination. My prayer is that I never have the opportunity when I have the inclination."

¹ Matthew 10:16

Does discernment matter to great people? Yes indeed. In his better days Solomon prayed for himself as he faced the responsibility of national leadership, 'So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.'² The Psalms begin with a warning to receive and live out the right counsel so that we will be 'like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither. Whatever they do prospers.'³ Paul prayed for the Philippians this remarkable and insightful prayer, 'And this is my prayer that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.'⁴ Love, knowledge, insight, discernment, purity and a fruitful life are Paul's desires for the people he loves. James says, 'But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.'⁵ Jesus gave us a description of the blessed and discerning life in his nine 'Blessed' are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted because of righteousness and are abused because of their relationship with Jesus. Discernment is right at the heart of a rich meaningful life.

How do I acquire a discerning life? This gift of discernment is the most precious gift and you can't purchase it like a car or a bag of peas. However it can be cultivated. If you are able to cultivate discernment much pain can be avoided and a great, yet challenging, life encountered. This does not mean an easy life because with discernment comes with increased responsibility. The truth is that if you want to remain a self-enclosed baby for the rest of your life this sort of discernment will not be yours. Discernment is a gift and should not be wasted. It is much more important than sports, owning your own home, the latest model car, designer clothing, international travel, nationality, perfume, your new kitchen or culinary excellence. Our futures depend on discernment. The future of the world depends on it.

In Matthew 7, through a simple yet brilliant story, Jesus laid down four foundation stones of discernment. Through them he taught us how to life-build so we can live the best life possible. What does he say? 'Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds

² 1 Kings 3:9

³ Psalm 1:3

⁴ Phil 1:9-11

⁵ James 3:17

blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.⁶ Here, Jesus gives us four foundations for a discerning life, the under-structure on which we can build our lives. What are the four foundation stones, the rocks on which to build our lives and cultivate discernment?

⁶ Matthew 7:24-27

First Rock: Follow Jesus

‘It is disadvantageous for us to treat God as a negotiator, both because God needs nothing we have and because God asks more than we could ever give. If all things come from God we can see that it is also *unwise* to treat God as a negotiator’

Miroslav Volf

‘Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock’

Matthew 7:24

Grace and Truth

The foundation of Christian discernment is Jesus, who he is, what he has done, and what he is doing. He is the Rock, the Prophet, the Priest and King. He is Son of God, Son of Man, the second person of the Trinity and the Word. You don’t get Christian discernment unless you get Him. To live a life of wisdom and encounter the discernment which flows from it requires a life built on, in and through Jesus Christ. Our primary gift, wonder and glory is Jesus Christ himself. He is the compass of the future and the nourishment for the present. He is the bright and morning star, the one who shines out above all others in His brilliant captivating splendour. He is our daily bread, living water and the door through which we encounter everything good. Our short or long term emotional, social and spiritual health do not primarily depend on the stock market, pension fund managers or decisions made by business, political or social leaders. Our futures depend on the way we engage with this Jesus Christ.

There is a description of Jesus in the book of John, ‘We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.’⁷ Jesus is the one and only, literally one of a kind, unique, he has no equal, being fully God and fully human, he has no parallel, he will never be repeated. Jesus is full of grace and truth. What does that mean?

We love playing games of exclusion, trying to work out who are the winners and losers, insiders and outsiders. Television is full of these games. Ann Robinson in her famous quiz programme, *Weakest Link*, tells people, with a delight, just before they do the ‘walk of shame’ and having been voted off

⁷ John 1:14

the programme that 'you are the weakest link – good bye'. The hugely successful *Big Brother* television programme works on a similar basis. One by one the contestants are ejected from the house through public voting. Who is the perceived loser in the house? Who is the least entertaining, sexy, cuddly or cute? The public are able to vote them off the programme through making a phone call, sweeping them into history and television oblivion. How about *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here?* This is similar to *Big Brother* but the people have some sort of fame attached to them. I can't help but feel that the real losers in all of this are the people who have desperation to play winners and losers.

This is not so with Jesus Christ. He does not play games of winners, losers, insiders and outsiders. His game is grace because His being is love. His game is as much inclusion as possible. However, we can choose exclusion ourselves. Grace was present before Jesus came but He brought it into its full, brilliant and gorgeous flourishing. Three intriguing stories help illustrate this.

In Matt 20:1-16 Jesus tells the story of an estate manager who went into his town square to employ men for work in his vineyard. He did this five times throughout the day and he struck a deal with each group of workers. At the end of the day all got the same money and the men who had worked all day were upset. To them this was unfair and they complained. What they did not grasp was the generosity and grace of their employer. Jesus was saying through the story "watch out, I am full of generosity. I am full of inclusive grace. With me it is possible that the first can be last and the last first."

In Luke 14:15-24 Jesus tells the story of a great banquet. The host sent out his servants to invite the guest to the party but they all have excuses. One has bought some property and has to look at it. Another has bought some animals and has to check them out. Another has just got married and needs to get home to his wife. The host then opens up the invitation to the misfits, homeless and wretched. Jesus was saying that his grace and generosity was open for all. All are invited to a great banquet which he is hosting.

In Luke 15: 20-24 we have the story of a disobedient, adventurous and prodigal son. He leaves his Father with his inheritance and heads for wine, women and song. He ends up eating with pigs and, in desperation, finally returns to his father who puts on a huge banquet for his wayward son. The son is brought back into the family. He was welcomed even though he was initially unthankful and

rebellious. He was lost but now found. He was dead but now alive. He received undeserved, loving, generous grace from the father.

Through these stories Jesus was demonstrating the way he works. This grace is about inclusion, it is about the remarkable discovery that you have found favour with God even though it was never deserved. This grace is intentional love and focused generosity and it is given to confused, rebellious and messed up people.

John says Jesus is also 'true', He is as straight as an arrow exploding from a bow. He is full of integrity, being pure and whole in every dimension. So, His grace is not some self-indulgence or softness on his part. His grace is full of honesty and correct judgement. When judgement is needed, judgement is delivered. On one occasion Jesus went into a temple and whipped out those who exploited others in the name of God. Through his death He broke the back of Satan's kingdom and all centres of evil. Through these and similar events, He was demonstrating that He is not only full of grace, but also full of truth and power. He is the fighter. He is heaven's Champion. This is who Jesus is - God full of grace and truth, yet arrow-straight and tough as steel. He is the foundation and core of a discerning life.

Hear and Do

Yet, if you want to develop a discerning life it is not long before the realisation dawns that Jesus is not enough. Our hearts are deceptive and at their most deceptive when it comes to our response to Jesus. We can see the grace and truth that Jesus is, but prefer to keep Him at a distance. We look at sports stars, royalty and celebrities from a distance. The good thing about them being distant is they have no effect on us or, if they do, it does not matter that much. We don't have a relationship with them where we have responsibilities to fulfil in response to their call on our lives. We hope we have control over the way they shape us, if they shape us at all, and we imagine we can switch them off whenever we want. It is possible to respond to Jesus in the same way. If we relate to Jesus as a sports star, royalty or a celebrity He may affect us in some sentimental distant way, but His wisdom and discernment will never characterise our lives. If we keep Jesus at a distance, turning Him into some sort of hero-celebrity, we will ensure our continued spiritual illiteracy.

To develop discernment you have a heart and head open, prepared to listen to what God may say to you. Then you listen and listen again. This will take some time and focus to do it well. Then you do

what He says, but more importantly you attempt to do what He says. The reality is that you have not really heard unless you have a go at *doing* what Jesus says. Doing what Jesus says is not as simple as it sounds, but is core to developing a discerning life. What is critical in developing this discerning life? The practices, habits, rituals and routines we live through every day.

Even though we are complex people, full of rich differences and histories, what we do on a regular basis creates much of what we are. We become like what we love, ultimately we are what we love. James K.A. Smith explains how our love is formed in us.⁸ He sees the education of our desires being one of our greatest challenges. I think it goes like this. The way in which our loves and desires become what they become is because of what fills our imaginations. But before that, our imaginations are formed through our dispositions, the feelings and attitudes we chose and possess. Yet, what forms our dispositions? What we are exposed to through habit and ritual? What do I do in on a regular basis most of the time or every day? So, what I expose my senses to and where I place my body will form me into what I am. As Smith says, 'the imagination runs off the fuel of images channelled by the senses.'⁹ My love and desire will be shaped by where I put my heart, head and body, by what I do. This is what Jesus was teaching. So our wisdom and discernment are cultivated through hearing and then doing what Jesus says, putting our hearts, heads and bodies into places that cause our love for Him to grow. Love requires no less.

We all love something. The question is: what is it that we love? What does that love achieve in our lives as we pursue it with our time, money and attention? If my love and desire is primarily money then my heart will become as numb to others as money is. If my primary love and desire is pornography then my heart's capacity for intimacy will be as unrelentingly stone-cold as pornography is. If my primary love and desire is power then my heart will become as corrupt as power, left on its own, ultimately is. So, Jesus says, 'if you love me keep my commandments'. Love me and desire me if you want a discerning life.

What do we need to do to put this rock in the right place?

We have to engage the practice of saying 'yes' and 'no'. We have to make choices. Because we are listening to Jesus and going to do what He says, we enter into a world of vow and disavow the world of 'yes' and 'no'. When we realise who Jesus is, and are drawn towards Him, we pledge ourselves to

⁸ James K.A. Smith, 2009, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic

⁹ James K.A. Smith, 2009, p.57

Him. We say 'yes' to Him. In doing this we shun other possible loves that would take His place. We say, 'no' to other idols that are on offer to take His place. A puny response will not do here. We need to say a strong and vivid 'yes' and ringing, vibrant 'no'. The truth is that we are always saying 'yes' and 'no' in everything we do or do not do, but we might not be conscious of the process. M. Shawn Copeland says that the practice of saying yes and no is to do with 'learning to live not merely in dull balance or tedious moderation but in passionate, disciplined choice and action.'¹⁰ I agree.

A life of repentance is vital for the development of discernment. This is the process of *mentanoia*, the choosing to turn to God. This is at the heart of Christian discernment. When we practice repentance we constantly turn to realign our lives with the call of God in us. In the process we discover our true selves in open, full and joyous relationship with God.

To establish this first rock in our foundation for discernment, we need to learn to speak, 'yes' and 'no' and have supple hearts which are able to turn, running back to the one who made us. Jesus is the foundation of our life-house. We start building here.

¹⁰ M. Shawn Copeland *Saying Yes and No* p.67

Second Rock: Anticipate All Conditions

'The early Church believed that its own fragile and vulnerable state was deceptive'

Samuel Wells

'The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundations on the rock'

Matthew 7:25

Vulnerability and battering

House building is about a vision of the future. Every nail, floor board and window is an expression of what you think may take place where you live. Quality house builders build in a way that anticipates the possible local conditions, all of them. What effect will the sun, rain, wind and cold have on the house? What can be built that will protect the people who live in it? What are the materials needed to make sure this house is able to stand in all possible conditions? These are the questions that every builder has to ask before they start the building project. Critical are the foundations. What sort of underpinning will this house have? A beautiful house filled with artistry and decoration will be dependent on the solidity of its foundations.

The first house Jesus refers to in this story has strong foundations. He was suggesting that your life be like this house. The rain will come down, the streams will rise and the winds will beat this house. It will be tested. He was saying that this house-building is like life-building, it is a great act of faith. As we build our life-house we are anticipating our possible futures. The quality of the foundation is a statement about what we think will happen in the future. Jesus was saying to get ready for all weathers. Prepare now for various conditions be they balmy, sunny days or for when the rain comes down, streams rise and winds blow. Prepare for calm conditions and for intense storm. The whole of scripture teaches us that, at some point, we are going to live with turbulence in one form or other. Life after life pays witness to this.

Yet, as you trace the stories of biblical heroes there is a significant twist. They do go through turbulent conditions, but these very conditions are the material with which their future is built. These bad conditions help them towards their glorious future, rather than deflecting them into self-indulgence or pity. It is as though they take the rain, floods and wind hitting their lives, submit to

God and texture it all in to their future. Abraham was called into constant change and a travelling life as he responded in faith to God's call. Often it looked like he was living in uncontrollable storm, but really God's house was being built in him and through that, a whole nation. Joseph was put in a hole by his brothers, then sold into slavery, and eventually dumped and forgotten in prison. It looked like he was spiralling down but really he was being built into a great leader for a critical time. Paul was converted and God's plan for him was to suffer for God's name. It looked like these conditions of suffering would damage him, but this was going to make him into the man he became. Jesus died and it looked like His death was the worst of conditions, but in the middle of the story of loss, Jesus rises from the dead. Jesus taught us this; 'for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.'¹¹ Being ready for all the possibilities of what that might mean is pivotal in the development of a discerning life.

Inner freedom

Discernment is often challenging because we are not free. We are not free to allow God to bring to us whatever conditions He chooses because we think we know what is best for us. We can easily slip into religious consumerism where we wander down the supermarket isles of life and think we can pick up whatever delectable item we like and this will always do us good. Dream on.

Five hundred years ago a Basque priest called Ignatius of Loyola had remarkable insight on this.¹² He described inner freedom as being, 'where people no longer desire health more than sickness, wealth more than poverty, a long life more than a short life, honour more than dishonour but instead they desire what brings them closer to the end for which they are created.'¹³ The idea is that you loosen the controls of your own life. This means that you are free from dictating to God the conditions in which you think you need to live. You leave that to God. If we constantly impose our own will on our own lives we will not be free. Rather, we will give to God a list of stuff that we want Him to deliver to us so we can live a life we consider to be good.

There are two great prayers of inner freedom and outstanding faith, that when prayed open us up to a discerning life. Firstly, Mary's prayer: 'Here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'¹⁴ Secondly, the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: 'your kingdom come, your will be

¹¹ Matthew 16:25

¹² Read J. Michael Sparough, Jim Manney, Tim Hipskind, 2010, *What's Your Decision: How to Make Choices with Confidence and Clarity*, Loyola Press, where they explore an Ignatian approach to decision making.

¹³ Spiritual Exercise 23

¹⁴ See Luke 1:26-28

done.¹⁵ Our request, tears, shouts and demands to God for Him to do this or that needs to be saturated in these huge prayers. We will not be open and free unless that is so and we will not develop a life of discernment.

What do we need to do to put this rock in the right place?

We have to become familiar with our own story. We need to notice the true nature of our own lives. This means being able to cling to the untidy history and jagged edges of what we have lived through so far. In the initial training of learning how to swim you are taught to make friends with the water, how to float. This is the best way to avoid drowning. In a similar way we have to learn to make friends with our own lives and notice what God is doing in them. We can do this through keeping a journal in whatever way is best and then regularly review our reflections. Do this honestly and reasonably consistently and you become familiar with your own true story. This will be critical in cultivating discernment.

Choosing challenging options prepares us for living in all conditions. If we focus on ease and softness we weaken our ability to discern. If we do not road test our own lives and see what we are like in various conditions we will not be prepared for the potential storm and subsequent flood. We will not be ready to the fight for the oppressed, the poor and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. It was this sort of freedom that enabled North Vietnam to conquer the South. After the conquering of the South by the North, Duong Van Mai Elliott explains, 'Nevertheless, for the middle class (in Saigon) the appearance of victorious peasants was a bitter pill to swallow. As if to rub salt into a raw wound their foes turned out to be not a sophisticated army all spit and polish but a force of undernourished peasant youths wearing ill-fitting uniforms, pith helmets and rubber sandals.' In other words country bumpkins with little education. For their part the soldiers could not believe their enemy had given up the fight so easily. Whenever people came up to them to talk, the soldiers would ask with wonder in their voices, 'you've got so much, hear such marvellous things, such riches why did you not fight harder to keep all of this¹⁶'. She goes on to explain, 'Although the Saigon middle class made fun of their conquerors deep down they felt ashamed that they had been defeated by such yokels. They could not understand that in the end commitment to a cause and

¹⁵ Matthew 6:9-13

¹⁶ Duong Van Mai Elliott, 1999, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*, Oxford University Press, p. 412

willingness to accept sacrifices in order to achieve victory meant more than all the sophistication of Saigon's army and its American weaponry.¹⁷

¹⁷ Duong Van Mai Elliott, 1999, P. 413

Third Rock: Track Your Heart

'Learning to interpret emotions is one of the best ways to discern God's will for our choices in life'

J. Michael Sparough, Jim Manney and Tim Hipkind

'But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand'

Matthew 7:26

Understand what your heart treasures

Jesus explained that the foolish man built his house on sand, choosing not to build on rock. This decision ensured he and all who lived in his house would eventually be overwhelmed. What happened? The wise builder and the foolish builder look much the same. Both were exposed to what Jesus has to say, both received the same opportunity. The critical difference is in implementation. Both hear but only one acts. Both receive wisdom, but only one turns this advice into concrete action.

Why would you build your house on sand? What self-deception could lead to such a bad decision? Impatience? maybe he just wanted the house building to be quick? Superficial? maybe he could not be bothered with research? Pride? maybe he could not take advice from anyone so chose to go his own way? Money? maybe he wanted a fast house sale to an ignorant buyer? Image? maybe his focus was on how it all looked rather than how it all was? Insecurity? maybe he was competing with the rock builder and wanted to demonstrate his way was faster? Could it be that he just did not know how to do this and so build on sand out of ignorance and dumbness, failing to understand the implications of what he was doing?

Imagine your heart is a dog and you have put it on its lead and you are taking it for a walk. Where is your dog-heart pulling you on this walk? Is it dragging you along? Is it really the dog taking you for a walk? What is distracting it as you walk? Does it want to fight all the other dogs? Does it want affection? Or possibly it does not want to walk at all and you are dragging it along while your dog-heart tries to route itself on the road by ploughing its claws into the earth. A distracted heart, a fighting heart, a heart that needs affection and a heart that wants to go nowhere are all possibilities that explain the condition of our hearts. If you want to know where your heart is and where it will go

you need to identify what you treasure. 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also',¹⁸ said Jesus. You open up the treasure chest of your life and discover your heart there.

Emotional life

To be able to develop discernment you will need to become familiar with your emotional life. You will need to track your own heart. Are our emotions useful? The ancient Greeks tended to think we would be better off with *apatheia* or 'apathy' which was freedom from emotions. They thought we should obtain *ataraxia* or 'peace of mind.' Kierkegaard disagreed, explaining that the good life was based on 'passionate inwardness.' I am going with Kierkegaard. Emotions give our life meaning; they let us know what is going on in us and around us. Rather than our emotions being dangerous and to be avoided, they are intelligent, extremely helpful and need to be noticed. However, we will need to learn to distinguish between the voice of the Holy Spirit and all other spirits in the process. To understand your emotions is to understand yourself. They are profound and give you the key to the meaning of your own existence. More than that, they are crucial in the way God communicates with us through the voice of the Holy Spirit. To be able to discern well we will need to notice our fear, anger, love, apathy, passion and tenderness and whatever else is passing through our hearts.

The contribution of the previously mentioned Ignatius is dazzling in working out how to track our hearts and hear the voice of God.¹⁹ There are many other schemes, systems and plans for listening to God but Ignatius is the Big Daddy of them all. Ignatius did serious work on how to renew and deepen our relationship with Christ with his invitation to meditate on the Gospels. He understood the spiritual battle behind discernment. If you want a quick fix to deliver a discerning life he will not help. If you want the quick fix, you are already building on sand and the storm clouds are forming in the distance.

Even though, throughout the world, God is speaking through teaching, preaching, prophetic words, dreams and visions, hearing the voice of God at a deeper level is invariably slow. There are rapid breakthroughs in our life with God but if they are not followed up by routine practices they eventually fade away. It is best to imagine yourself as a tree to be watered rather than a rocket to be fired or a resource to be deployed. "God has sped spiritual growth up because we are in a technological age," I heard one speaker strangely say. I liked the rest of his message. Pivotal is being

¹⁸ Matt 6:19-21; Luke 12:32 and forward

¹⁹ James L. Wakefield, 2005, *Sacred Listening: Discovering the Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*, Baker Books. Wakefield adapts the exercises of Ignatius for a Protestant audience.

able to slow down, and in the words of Stephen Cottrell learn how to, 'Do nothing to change your life.'²⁰ God is not forced to move at the pace of Microsoft or Google. It is still the case that the strong and blessed person is the one who 'delights in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither. Whatever they do prospers.'²¹

What do we need to do to put this rock in the right place?

Mediation in and contemplation of scripture is critical in the development of your own inner life. There is no substitute or short cut to developing discernment. Reading, hearing, mediating and praying scripture has no equal in your spiritual formation. This is where we learn who God is, who we are, what is going on in the world and what we should be doing. It is through scripture that God's word comes to us and we are able to discern what is upside down and right way up. It is only as scripture is woven into our hearts that we can begin to track what is going on deep down inside. It is scripture that challenges us and pulls our imaginations back into the right shape. Pray for and cultivate a love for the Bible if you want discernment. Then get yourself into a regular pattern of reading and mediation that will go on until the end of your days.

Solitude and silence are desirable but not always easy to create. The demands of contemporary life, the data swamp and our high aspirations get in the way of solitude and silence. Solitude does not mean being lonely and silence does not mean dull. In solitude and silence we are in the company of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You are never alone in this sort of solitude. Sometimes fear keeps us away from solitude and silence because we are just scared of what we might have to deal with when we listen. But facing that fear is just part of the process of growing up. It will also mean that we will need to be free enough to not have a full diary. This is a place of high anxiety for many because being busy is one of our tribal markings of so-called success. Why are these practices important? In solitude and silence we are saying to God our time is yours and we are ready to listen. They become places of revelation, but you have to hang around with God to get them and He is in charge of when they come.

²⁰ Stephen Cottrell, 2007, *Do nothing to Change Your Life*, London: Church House Publishing

²¹ Psalm 1:2-3

Fourth Rock: Live inside out

‘Shine, from the inside out that the world might see you live in me’

A song for children written by Nick Jackson

‘The wise man built his house upon the rock’

Matthew 7:24

Building for others

House building is about others. It is about establishing a place where you can bring up a family, offer hospitality, be safe and participate in the wider community. It is also about making a village, town or city. Building a house is much more significant than the personal agenda of the builder. If you are the house builder then your responsibility is the safety of all the people who will live there for the next twenty years. You must think long-term and you must think other people. This is why building on sand is not just a mistake but can also be a sin, particularly if you have been warned to build on rock. Building on sand, when you have been told to build on rock, is an act of negligence. The negligence emerges out of self-enclosure which is often rooted in pride, fear or both.

It can come as a shock when you discover you are not the point of your own life. This is the point when all the walls of self-enclosure, that you might not know are even there, begin to slowly crumble or come crashing down in a flood. The discovery that we are living a self-enclosed life can stop you in mid-sentence or creep up on you slowly like a stalking cat. However it comes, this revelation is central to developing discernment. I often feel a vague sense of desperation when meeting an older person who has never discovered this. It is surely a significant failure if, when reaching your forties, you still believe you are the sun around which everyone else must revolve. The reality is that we are all part of a huge saga. Our houses are parts of towns, towns are parts of cities and cities are submerged into countries and eventually the world. The saga is the long story of all the rich and often complicated events taking place in the life of a community and a nation.

The wise man built his house on the rock. He was building his house so it would be a place where others could live over the long haul. He was building part of a town which was interconnected with every other house in the area. House building, like life building, is a social event.

Outside yourself

Our self-absorption will rob us of discernment. Self-absorption prevents us from seeing. It is like being at a football match trying to watch the game with some loud hulk in front who is constantly standing up and blocking the view. In self-absorption this hulk is inside your own head and heart so you cannot see what is happening outside the borders of your own life. You can't see the game. Self-absorption is also like having a series of mirrors encircling your own head with the reflection sides all turned inward. It is impossible to see beyond them because you are always the largest thing you can see. You fill your own vision. With these mirrors in place it is impossible to enter self-forgetfulness which is so important in discernment. There is also the possibility that you will bore yourself to death with the dullness of your own life. Self-forgetfulness is a place which not only cultivates discernment but is the place of deep, deep joy.

How do we know if we are self-absorbed? Three questions will constantly fill our minds and shape our response, even though we might not be aware that we are asking them. Question one is 'am I right?', question two is 'am I safe?'²², question three is 'am I happy?' If those questions dominate our heads and hearts it will be difficult to develop a healthy life and cultivate discernment. We will need to get beyond these questions so we can ask other more interesting and important questions that are much more to do with 'we' and 'us' rather than 'me' and 'I.' We develop discernment if we can see outside of ourselves and focus on the world around us. Rather than this depleting us the opposite happens. We begin to see our own lives in the middle of other lives. We learn that we are part of a wonderful complex pattern of humans. Wisdom and discernment begin to pour in at that point.

What do we need to do to put this rock in the right place?

Love the Church. If we are going to live from the inside out we need to pray for an increasing hunger to love the church. For all of her confusions and contradictions the church is the most beautiful of creations. She is the most beautiful of all in the world. She consists of people made in the image of God who want to live the best they can for the one who made them.²³ Such wonders happen in

²² Rowan Williams in an interview with David Hare said, 'If I am not paralysed by the two questions, 'Am I right' and 'Am I safe' then there are other things I can ask myself,' The Guardian, *God's Boxer* interview 8 July 2011

²³ Read John Stott, 2007, *The Living Church: Convictions of a lifelong pastor*, Inter-Varsity Press, and feel the love and absorb the clarity of Stott's reflections on the church, see 'I have a dream of a living church, p.197-182.

church. People forgive other people. People have patience with other people. People encourage other people. People heal other people. People rejoice with people. People suffer with people. People give to people. The church is a wonder because she displays the wonder of God. Certainly there is sin, fear and hypocrisy but the overwhelming vast majority of the church consists of earnest people seeking to live the best they can. I know this to be true. I have spent thirty years traveling the world speaking and interacting with churches of all sorts and she is wonderful. Jesus loves the church and discernment comes to those who love what Jesus loves.

Get out and love the world. Archbishop William Temple famously said, 'the church is the only co-operative society in the world which exists for the benefit of its non-members.' This is probably an exaggeration but it is an insightful line. Wonderful as the church is, we have not always loved the world well. Apartheid, racism, misogyny and a bias towards the rich have brought much hurt and still does. We cannot change the world by ourselves but we can change our world through one prayerful act at a time. Acts of loving service to our local, national or global world will cultivate discernment in us like nothing else can. You learn so much through investing in the bank of service to others. This brings us back to our first foundation. We hear but then do if we want to develop discernment. If you want discernment turn your attention to the world and work out how you can love and serve the people in it.

Consequences of Discernment

'When Jesus finished saying these things the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law'

Matthew 7:28-29

To construct a house of discernment following Jesus is foundational rock one, anticipating all conditions rock two, tracking our own hearts rock three and living from the inside out is rock four. If we put these rocks in the foundations of our lives increasing wisdom, insight and discernment will be the result. On the other hand there is another way to live. If we hand if we choose to walk away from the God who made us, insist we get our own little way, ignore the condition of our inner life and expect that the world serves us, we cultivate a different life. Oblivion is often the result.

People loved what Jesus said. They were amazed at this story. Why was that? It was because He spoke with authority. He spoke from wisdom, demonstrating His discernment, and that gave Him

influence. Discerning people are attractive to people hungry for truth and freedom. Grow in wisdom and discernment and people are drawn to you if they want to know how to live well. But His authority was not only rooted in His words, but also in His deeds. They listened to Him because His life was one confluence of word and deed as He displayed His wisdom and power through His discerning life. He taught them how to live and He teaches us as well. He is working with us as we battle our way through the data swamp, media flood and sinking walls of contemporary culture. He teaches us so we can sift, distinguish and discern so that we all can be what we can possibly be.

Viv Thomas is the Director of Formation Global and the Hon Teaching Pastor of St. Paul's Hammersmith. You can contact Viv via www.formation.org.uk and email at viv.thomas@formation.org.uk