JESUS AND DISCERNMENT

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The technicalities of discernment are not easily illuminated from the gospel material. The evangelists lead us through theological narratives about Jesus from a variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, the correlation of christology and discipleship is an important element in these theological narratives and offers a point of entry for the contemporary reader. Consequently the way Jesus has chosen to be himself has significance for any Christian coming to a sense of who he or she is to be.

A believing response to the gospels demands some kind of congruence between the way Christians live their lives and the story of Jesus. To that extent Christians' own processes of reflection demand an analogous theological narrative. This theological narrative is always provisional, since at any given point of articulating a self-understanding, there is a revision or re-assessment of past memories and some kind of orientation towards the future. Discernment is a process whereby a person arrives at a point of engaging his or her future on the basis of a self-understanding which includes an appropriation of the legacy of the past. That future is not so much a specific programme to be adhered to, rather it is a growth of trust in risking the future on God. Discernment then is characterized by an appropriation of the legacy of the past and by a consideration of the possibilities of the future which are both held in sufficient perspective to allow a person to experience his or her own freedom to serve God.

With this preamble, I now turn to the task of talking about Jesus and discernment. Since claims about the historical Jesus are hedged around with a daunting array of technical exegetical problems, I propose to approach the question by examining *Luke's* portrayal of Jesus. Within that focus, I want to examine the question of how Luke portrays those moments where Jesus comes to a sense of himself.

1. The finding of the child Jesus in the Temple: Luke 2, 41–51

A particular way of coming to a sense of oneself is to break free from the identity that others create. Other people's expectations may have some legitimacy, and in part they may provide a

provisional sense of continuity which makes life possible. Therefore moments which are apparently discontinuous with others' expectations offer a window on the self. It is clear that such a process is occurring here in the disjunction between 'Your father and I have been looking for you anxiously' and 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' Jesus, on the verge of adulthood at twelve years old, asserts a sense of himself and his relationships which clash with what has gone before. Nevertheless, he goes back to Nazareth with his parents and is obedient to them. The conflict is somehow integrated, and the pattern of Jesus's life continues as before, but in the narrative, as in life, there is a new dimension which waits to be fully woken. And indeed, in Luke's account it is difficult not to hear Jesus's future resonate here. He will make another fateful journey to Jerusalem with his disciples who will supplant his relatives, and he will not be found for three days. This incident at the end of his childhood carries within it the seeds of God's future for Jesus even while he is unaware of it. There is precisely here, at this moment of sensing who he is, an openness to God's future for him.

2. The baptism, genealogy and temptations

The intertwined Infancy Narratives of John and Jesus have prepared us for the interconnection of their ministries which begin the gospel proper. Curiously, in Luke's gospel the descent of the Spirit is associated with, but separate from, the baptism. The context is *after* the baptism while Jesus was at prayer, as he often is at important moments in Luke. The descent of the Spirit and the divine voice are mutual guarantees of the truth that Jesus half-glimpsed in the Temple, that he is Son of God. Thus Jesus in prayer receives a dual confirmation of a new sense of himself as Son of God. Once again there is an open-ended dimension.

What are we to make of the genealogy interposed between the baptism and the temptations? It is clearly a dislocation of the narrative, and precisely because of that, demands some attention. The genealogy moves from Jesus back to Adam who is also called Son of God. It might be tempting to see an Adam/New Adam pattern here, but there is nothing to suggest that this is the author's intent. It is rather another appeal to the continuity which operates as a kind of counterpoint to the discontinuity which the naming of Jesus as Son has suggested. Jesus's new sense of who he is has to be defined over against the history of humanity, particularly as it has been mediated through Israel.

The temptations (4,1–13) offer a particular example of this. Jesus is challenged in his identity as Son of God to define himself

against particular texts of scripture which claim to illuminate specific contexts.

If Jesus's life is to be shaped by his sense of himself as Son, then the temptations function to propose possible shapings or scenarios. Furthermore these hypothetical futures are provided with a warrant that must be taken seriously. Scripture is used to paint a false scenario for Jesus, and the argument is a theological one. These suggestions clash with the sense of God which Jesus has, and his own articulation of that sense of God is equally supported by scripture. The legacy of Israel's experience of God formulated in scripture is not rejected in itself; what is rejected is the range of hypothetical actions which are given a dubious cogency by their association with biblical texts. What makes the difference is that Jesus's sense of God clashes with the sense of God underlying these proposals.

The temptations offer a moment in the gospel where Jesus comes to a sense of himself, albeit in a predominantly negative sense. Scripture is important in this process, because it offers a treasury of past faith experience which has a claim on Jesus. At the same time, scripture has a double function: it both reveals who God is for Jesus and who Jesus is for God. Therefore the sense of God which gives the sense of self can consider the future and find it wanting. Jesus's rather terse responses confirm this dual anthropological and theological focus. 'Human beings shall not live by bread alone' (4,4). 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve' (4,8). 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God' (4,12).

The baptism, temptations and the synagogue discourse in 4,14-30 are also distinguished in Luke's gospel by a cluster of references to the Spirit. After the descent of the Spirit at the Jordan, Jesus is 'full of the Holy Spirit' (4,1) and he is led into the desert by the Spirit. The little summary report between the temptations and the synagogue discourse is a confirmation of what has transpired in the temptations. But it is also a confirmation of one facet of Jesus's ministry, namely teaching.

> And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all (4,14-15).

In this way the scene is set for what is often referred to as the 'programmatic' or 'inaugural' discourse in the synagogue in Nazareth. For our purposes what is important here is that for the

first time since the enigmatic remark to his parents in the Temple, Jesus makes a positive statement about his sense of himself.

3. The synagogue discourse: 4,16-30

The quotation from Isaiah is familiar:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
> because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovering of sight to the blind,
> to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
> to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

But the narrative starts by referring to Nazareth as the place 'where he had been brought up', and continues by indicating that it was Jesus's practice to go to synagogue on the sabbath. The actions of Jesus are recounted with a patterned solemnity: he stood up to read, the book was given to him, he opened the book. This is followed by the quotation, and then the reversal of these actions, he closed the book, gave it back and sat down. The framing of the text from Isaiah by these formal steps raises an atmosphere of tension and expectancy, which Luke expresses by saying that 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him'. So the scripture has been read, and the reading has created a space where it can be heard, but the hearing of it is not complete until it is interpreted and appropriated. There is almost a freeze-frame effect, and the action does not continue until Jesus says 'today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. Jesus appropriates the text to himself and interprets it for his hearers.

These two distinct moments of interpretation make the shift in the narrative understandable. The first response to Jesus is universally positive, but the mood changes to one of total hostility which engenders a mob violence against Jesus. In a scene pre-figuring the crucifixion, they force him outside the synagogue, carry him up a hill with the intent of putting him to death. But their intent is frustrated as it is not God's will 'that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem' (13,33).

What is particularly striking here is that it seems as though Jesus has provoked this hostility by the offensiveness of his utterances, though here too we have in narrative form a saying of Jesus which comes later in the gospel, 'Blessed is he who takes no offence at me' (7,23). But the question arises as to what catalyzes this change of mood, and it is clearly the phrase in 4,22, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'

In the dynamism of the description of the beginning of the ministry from the naming of him as Son and the descent of the

Spirit, the identification of Jesus as 'Joseph's son' is a regressive moment. It is an attempt by others to set limits to the sense of self that Jesus is coming to. It is also a statement about the expectations of the people of Nazareth. In a way, it is analogous to the temptations, and if combined with Jesus's initial response could be re-written in the form of the temptations: 'If you are Joseph's son, do here what you did in Capernaum'. In this case, proverb is set against proverb. 'Physician heal yourself' is challenged by the aphorism, 'No prophet is acceptable in his own country'. And the second proverb is supported decisively by two appeals to scriptural precedent and the prophetic figures of Elijah and Elisha.

In this instance then, Jesus's sense of self is threatened by the easy assumption of his audience that they know who he is and what can be expected from him, and he rejects this vigorously. In the process he reaches for and finds another category for himself, that of the prophet, a figure who acts in unexpected ways under the inspiration of the Spirit. This prophetic identity of Jesus is one which is emphasized by Luke in his presentation of the Jesus of the ministry. Even in the account to the stranger on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas describes Jesus as 'a prophet, mighty in word and deed before God and all the people'. By a process of opposition, Jesus confirms his sense of self and discovers a role through which his sense of self can be articulated. Several factors appear here which are important for a discussion of discernment.

Challenge and confirmation, or even confirmation through opposition are necessary elements. Furthermore, confirmation seems to entail a generative dimension; in this case, it is the prophetic role.

4. The messengers from John the Baptist: 7,18-35

Challenge and confirmation are also a feature of this incident. In this case, the challenge comes from what seems perhaps an unlikely source, John the Baptist, whose own identity has been intertwined with that of Jesus from the beginning of Luke's gospel.

The connection of this incident with the inaugural synagogue discourse is enhanced by its context in Luke. The two preceding incidents, which are at least part of 'these things' which John is told of by his disciples, are evocative of the prophetic examples employed by Jesus in chapter four. The universality of the prophetic mission of Elijah and Elisha in their activity outside Israel is echoed in Jesus's healing of the centurion's son, while the raising of the widow's son at Nain is reminiscent of both Elijah (1 Kg 17,17-24) and Elisha (2 Kg 4,32-37). Finally the acclamation of the people to the second miracle acclaims Jesus in the role of a

prophet, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' and 'God has visited his people!' This latter phrase also recalls the *Benedictus* (1,68), the hymn of praise where the roles of John and Jesus are celebrated.

This then is the setting for the Baptist's question, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?' (7,19). Again it is a case of someone else's expectations being introduced to challenge Jesus's sense of self. The Baptist seems to have expected Jesus to have been a fiery reformer, from what we can gather of his words in chapter three. Jesus's response picks up the passage from Isaiah which was read in the synagogue. But now the scripture is enmeshed in his own experience of himself and his role:

> In that hour he cured many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many that were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offence at me' (7,21-23).

It is probably worth noting the way that scripture is not being quoted here as something external to the situation; it is now completely integrated into the articulation of what is occurring. The challenge and confirmation which make up the first part of this incident also generate another formulation of Jesus's sense of who he is. Although in large part 7,24-35 is a passage where Jesus gives his assessment of John the Baptist, given how their identities are intertwined in Luke's gospel, it is not surprising that this leads into a statement about Jesus himself.

> For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has a demon'. The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children (7,33-35).

This charge has already been laid against Jesus at the table-friendship after the call of Levi (5,27-32), and will recur at the beginning of chapter fifteen as the setting for the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. In chapter seven, this identification of Jesus as a friend of tax-collectors and sinners relates to its context in two ways. First of all, it seems to give some content to the rather enigmatic 'blessed is he who takes no offence at me' (7,23). Secondly, Jesus acts out this identity in the

story immediately following of the sinful woman who comes to him when he has been offered table-friendship at the house of a pharisee named Simon. What happens here is that Jesus accepts a label put on him by others, 'a friend of tax-collectors and sinners', and owns it as authentic to his own sense of self. He then proceeds to live it out in the incident with the woman at the pharisee's table. A negative label invites the person labelled to disown it and accommodate to the views of those uttering the criticism.

Such an invitation receives narrative form, when Simon the pharisee asks Jesus to eat with him, to share table-friendship. One function of the woman in the narrative is to indicate that Jesus's table-friendship never excludes this kind of person. Indeed true table-friendship *requires* such people. This is borne out at the end of the story when Jesus points out the way in which the deficiencies of Simon's table-friendship—no water to wash, no welcoming kiss, no oil—have all been supplied by the woman. Consequently Jesus owns his table-friendship with tax-collectors and sinners as essential to his God-given sense of self with which there can be no compromise and which entails conflict. It is often in conflict situations where one's sense of self is most under pressure, and conflict can often result in a retreat into stubborn defensiveness. Here, however, Jesus invites Simon to share his insights through the medium of the parable, and it is for Simon to decide whether his way of looking at things is to be changed.

5. The prayer of thanksgiving: 10,21–22

> In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'.

If a sense of self is not to collapse into a quasi-solipsism, then it must be communicated to others in a way that is generative and empowering. If this happens, then there is a level of confirmation of the discerned sense of self. It is clear that this is occurring here in this prayer which Jesus makes when the seventy return from their mission. The results of their mission confirm that God is at work in the disciples. This causes Jesus to rejoice in the Spirit, which is not only an indication of consolation, but also gives what follows an authoritative character, emerging as it does from Jesus filled with the Spirit. What is confirmed here is that Jesus is doing

the Father's will, is fulfilling his plan, and that the disciples are part of that plan and design. Here Jesus's experience of what is occurring, his understanding, is being measured against what God's will is. And the congruence between the two results in a joy in the Spirit expressed in thanksgiving. At the same time, the second half of the prayer is a profound expression of Jesus's sense of himself as Son in relationship with the Father. The subsequent beatitude also relates this present experience to the history of Israel and judges it to be in continuity:

> 'Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it' (10,23-24).

6. Passion and resurrection

The prayer of thanksgiving, while full of joy at God's revelation to the 'babes', also contains a darker note. It is also part of God's plan to conceal his purpose from the 'wise and clever'. Their role as protagonists comes to the fore in Jerusalem. It has been clear since the Transfiguration that Jesus's identity is tied up with what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. Luke alone mentions the subject of Jesus's conversation with Moses and Elijah and it is his 'departure which he is to accomplish in Jerusalem' (9,31). This occurs in an incident where, after Jesus prays, he is confirmed in his identity as Son of God. Thereafter, the gospel is oriented towards Jerusalem as the 'journey narrative' begins: 'When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem' (9,51). Again in 13,22, 'He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching, and journeying towards Jerusalem.' There are other passages which reiterate this purpose such as 17,11; 18,31; 19,28. All of this receives its significance from the passage in 13,33 already referred to 'for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem'. As with the Passion predictions, this formulation stands under the rubric of the divine plan, 'it is necessary'. God's plan for Jesus involves his death, and this is recognized in the last supper and in Luke's somewhat abridged account of the agony in the garden,

> Father if thou art willing, remove this cup from me;
> nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done (22,42).

At the crucifixion, it is the wise and clever who set the tone for the final challenge to Jesus and his sense of himself:

> He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One! (23,35)

This is echoed, first by the soldiers, and then by one of the criminals who points out his own interest in any such outcome: 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' Again as in the temptations, these people put a name on Jesus, and demand that he fulfil their expectations of what that name entails. Even or especially in his dying, Jesus's sense of self is challenged, but in Luke's gospel it receives support from an unexpected quarter. One of the thieves speaks to him, and his mode of address is unusual. He calls him simply 'Jesus'. No one else in the gospel addresses Jesus in this unadorned way. This, taken together with his request, 'remember me when you come into your kingdom', takes us back to the beginning of the gospel and the angel Gabriel's naming of the child:

> You shall call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end (1,31-33).

The promise of the angel has reached its completion, and ironically it is only the repentant thief who has recognized in Jesus's death the hidden purpose of God, and that God's future for Jesus can be his own future too. In another way, too, the thief confirms Jesus's sense of self since he is, *par excellence*, the oppressed captive to whom Jesus has proclaimed release, the poor one who receives the good news that this is the acceptable year of the Lord in the formulation, 'today you will be with me in paradise'.

The resurrection appearances in Luke are pre-eminently the occasions where Jesus gives first to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and secondly to a larger gathering of the disciples, the definitive interpretation of himself, an interpretation which also involves their future activity and future relationship with the Father:

> Then he said to them, 'These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, 'thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high' (24,44-49).

The resurrection appearances in Luke are a confirmation that the sense of self out of which Jesus lived was indeed God-given;

that his understanding of himself and how that related to Israel's legacy of scripture was attuned to God's plan for him and for all human beings. Because it is *in his name*, grown into by his living and his dying, that God's universal plan of salvation will be brought to fruition.

If there is any currency in talking about discernment as the process by which one tries to stay attuned to the sense of self which God gives us, then Luke's gospel suggests some points for consideration. This process comes about through moments of confirmation, moments of challenge which are often generative of a new or renewed way of looking at oneself. That also has to be confirmed by an owning of the insight through action that may be an entry into conflict, which itself needs to be marked by a continued openness to opponents. A new sense of self must also be confirmed by being shared with others in such a way that they are empowered by it. It is important to be in touch with the past and to own a sense of continuity with it, but not every reading of the past is valid, just as not every hypothetical future is an authentic future. Both have to be weighed against the sense of God who is faithful to the daughters and sons who offer their selves willingly in God's service. For Luke, God's fidelity to Jesus is spoken through the unlikely person of the penitent thief, the last of a series of people who have tried to tell Jesus who he is. At the ultimate moment of challenge, the thief proclaims and confirms that God has a future for Jesus.