

THE DIVINE NUDGE

This is one of those sermons when I'm really not sure if it's going to be of any use to you. If it is, that's great. If it isn't, well it's only 12 minutes!

I want to speak about guidance, God's guidance. And I wonder whether we ever think about that, about whether God guides us, and if so, how. Maybe we only see in retrospect that a good hand has been active in our lives all through. And maybe that's enough? But are we missing a whole gift from the good shepherd if we don't seek that guidance? Let's see how we go...

A bishop had been preaching at the morning service and came back to the vicarage for lunch. The vicar's young son was left in charge of the bishop while the vicar and his wife finished preparing the meal. The young lad said, 'So how do you become a bishop?' The bishop duly explained that you had to train hard, become a curate, then a vicar, and perhaps then you might be an archdeacon or something a bit different, and then finally came the invitation to become a bishop. 'Why do you ask?' said the bishop. The young lad said, 'I was listening to my parents this morning, and they were talking about you, and my dad said 'how *on earth* did you become a bishop.'

I'd like to say God has a hand in it, but that's special pleading. I have to remember another apocryphal story of a bishop going to a vicarage to offer the vicar a prestigious new post. The vicar said he must go away and pray about it; his wife went upstairs to pack.

Guidance – how does that work? And what's it got to do with today's gospel? And what's that got to do with the vocation we each have, given by God? Well, we have in John 10 the familiar image of Jesus as the good shepherd. The good shepherd **knows** his sheep, 'I know my own and my own know me.' He **feeds** his sheep, he finds them the best pasture. He **protects** his sheep; he fights for them and even lays down his life for them. But he also **leads** his sheep, he '*goes ahead of them and they know his voice.*'

So, do we know the voice of God? Are we at all conscious of being led by God on our life-journey? Or is it a succession of random or self-chosen activities? The good shepherd, I would maintain, wants to guide us, to lead us to good pasture; he doesn't want to direct us, force us, overrule our free choice. But he wants us to flourish, to be as glad as we can be.

The Bible never uses the word 'guidance.' But it does talk about a guide. If you're driving in a strange city looking for an address you might stop and ask someone the way. And the local might say, 'Take the third right, go through four sets of lights, turn left, then sharp right by the school, up the hill, round a few bends and it's the fourth street on the left.' Or he might say, 'I'm going that way right now; let me get in and I'll show you the way.' That's what Jesus does. We keep driving but he is our guide.

But how? How do you know if a course of action is right or not? How do you know if that way of serving God is right for you, that role in church, that role in the community, even that career?

For some people it seems to be very clear. I knew someone in Durham who kept resisting a call to ordination but just couldn't shake it off. In bed one Sunday morning she said to God, 'OK, I need a clear sign today, one way or the other.' She got to church, there was no-one to look after the creche, so she quickly volunteered so that she'd be safe from anything that might be said in the service. But she forgot there was a loudspeaker in the creche and she heard the preacher say 'There's someone here this morning who's trying to decide about ordination.' Drat it, she thought; but she actually had cancer, so she said the message couldn't be for her. The next day she was at a health centre and the person treating her said, 'I don't know why, but I keep seeing a picture of you with a dog collar on.' She gave in! She was ordained.

But most of us don't have anything like that experience. Most of us look back at our lives and maybe see a loving hand at work quietly, gently, seeing us through – at best giving us a nudge. We're not at all sure about asking for signs. We know it can get a bit silly. A young missionary was always looking for signs to guide him, and he told a friend he'd gone to South America because when he'd been asking for guidance he'd suddenly seen a bar of chocolate with Brazil nuts in it. His sceptical friend asked, 'What would you have done if it had been a Mars bar?'

No, God doesn't really work like that; he doesn't play games. Nor does he set us a crossword puzzle to solve so only one preconceived answer will do. God helps us to help ourselves, to use our own intelligence, sensitivity and love. But he does nevertheless help our thinking process, our way of deciding. He does it more like a butterfly on the shoulder than by writing in the sky. He won't override our dignity as mature human beings – but he loves us; so he's bound to want to help. *Guidance is a matter of using our God-given intelligence, enhanced by divine grace.*

Fr Macarius was one of the founding saints of the Egyptian Coptic Church. He knew God was calling him to build a monastery but he didn't know where. As he searched the desert he kept asking, 'Is it here. Or over there? Or where?' But God was silent. At last, so the story goes, an angel appeared with a message, 'The Lord isn't going to show you where to build the monastery. He wants you to choose the place. If he tells you where to build and things go wrong, you'll only blame him. So you must choose.' And he did, *using his own God-given intelligence, enhanced by divine grace.*

So how does that divine grace come? Here's a simple list:

1. Deep convictions - the ideas that come to us as 'loud thoughts' - they need to be heard.
2. What is it that keeps coming to mind as you pray and read scripture? Be attentive to those things.
3. What do wise friends say? You know whose thoughts you value. Talk to them.
4. What do circumstances say? Doors close and others open. Practical family concerns are important too. So what's happening around you and to you? What are the facts on the ground?

5. What do your instincts say? A wise spiritual director said to me as I took on a major new post, 'Trust your instincts. God has been working on them for years'

A last thought: there isn't a right or wrong answer to a question of discerning a way forward. It isn't the case that if we make a 'wrong' decision God will hold it against us and life will turn out badly. God uses and works with whatever we decide.

So what is it that you might do next in your Christian journey? Vocation sounds a very big word, but its only about us finding the place where we can best love, grow and be useful as a Christian. Be open to God's gentle nudge, and talk to someone else about it – going public is what seals the deal. It doesn't have to be anything big. But it's a matter of, as one writer put it, 'finding the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.' Or more prosaically, the place where our skills and enjoyment of life meet what the community around us needs. It's the place where we come alive, and others with us.

What then is each of us here today called to offer to God at this stage of life? What will give you joy, and give others value? How might Jesus the good shepherd call you into deeper discipleship? It's an open question. And it's to do with our flourishing, alongside others flourishing.

Francis of Assisi said 'I have done what is mine to do; may Christ teach you what is yours.'