

Guidance for life's big decisions

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, 22nd October 2006.

Isaiah 30:18-21, John 16: 5-15

We all face big decisions in life. Decisions like: How do I bring up my children? How much money do I spend on things like: going out, the gym, church, or charity? Should I buy this house? Should I marry this person, or live with them? Big decisions, in a society where there seems to be an unlimited number of options. And lots of the traditions and way-makers from the past seem to have been swept away.

A whole industry has grown up in helping people to negotiate life's big decisions. Some people have 'life-coaches' who help them make their choices. Lots of people follow the advice of TV experts and agony aunts. And for most people the main factor that shapes their decision is: What's normal? What would most people do in my situation? That's why we're so interested in opinion polls and surveys.

Most people don't want to be seen as being too out of step with most people in society. So we read about how other people are planning to vote, how most people handle child-discipline, what other people spend their money on, what they do or don't do sexually, and so on. The implication is this: if most people do it, it's OK.

I heard somebody talking the other day about ants. How they find their way around by following the ant in front. Which is why we have long trails of ants in our garden and sometimes in our kitchen. Ants are programmed to follow the ant in front.

But sometimes the ant at the front doesn't know where he's going. And you get a circle of ants going round and round in circles, none of them knowing where they're going, but all determined to keep on following the ant in front. It's a good parable for the confusion lots of people live in today. The only guidance they feel they have in life is to go wherever the next person seems to be going, to do whatever opinion polls and their neighbours say is 'normal'.

For the Christian, there has to be another factor involved. And that other factor is God. Because Christians have always believed that God's intimately involved in our lives, he's interested in what we do and how we live. In fact, he's interested in the tiniest details of our lives.

So a crucial issue for any Christian is guidance. Looking to God to guide our decisions in life. But that then raises a whole lot of questions: Does God really guide? And if so, how does God guide? So this morning we're spending a few minutes looking at the issue of guidance. And I want to focus in particular on one verse of our OT reading today. Isaiah 30:21: 'If you stray from the road to right or left, you shall hear with your own ears a voice behind you saying, This is the way; follow it.'

In this verse we get some good clues to how guidance works. And the first pointer is the picture of God that it gives.

There's a view of God going round which says God is a kind of divine watchmaker. He makes the universe as a giant machine, which is run according to impersonal laws, and then he withdraws from the scene. So the role of God in the history of the universe is that he got it all started. He wound up the mechanism, and then left it to run. He's a God who is essentially distant, way beyond the blue somewhere, and leaves his creation well alone.

The technical term for this is DEISM, and it's what a lot of people believed in the 18th and 19th centuries. But even today, a lot of ordinary people have beliefs which are the same as Deism, even if they've never heard of the technical term for it. A lot of people have that very remote view of God. He's unchanging, unmoved, the distant author of creation who's now gone into early retirement.

The trouble is, that's a million miles away from the biblical picture of God. In the Bible the whole world is seen as constantly charged up with the glory of God, he's intimately involved with his creation, and he's even open to being changed by interaction with his creation. That's the opposite of Deism.

And it's this kind of God you find in this verse from Isaiah. The God who's right beside you, so near he can whisper a word of guidance. The God who's with you every step of the way. One who doesn't sit above your life situations, but is there with you in the middle of it all. Remember, we worship a God who came to earth as a human being and was executed by the system. He knows what it's like to live in the real world. Jesus promises his disciples: 'I am with you always, even to the end of the age'. Well, that's what we see here in Isaiah. A God who's with us always, ready to whisper his words of comfort and guidance whenever we need them.

So the answer to the first part of our question, which is about the character of God, is Yes: God does guide. He's interested in the whole of our lives, not just the so-called religious bits. He's involved in the life choices we make.

So if we're saying God guides, does that mean that it's our job to be passive and not to do anything until we get a clear command from God? There's a funny story about what happens when somebody's so desperate for guidance that they lose their common sense.

It's about a woman who'd wake up and pray to God to guide her. First she'd ask for guidance about whether to get up, and she'd only get up when she felt she'd heard an inner voice telling her to. And then she'd pray about which sock to put on first. And then she'd pray about the other sock. And sometimes she thought she heard God telling her to put on an odd sock, so she'd go out with socks which didn't match.

That's not guidance, that's just silly. And the reason it's silly is because of something in this verse from Isaiah. The old woman was assuming she had to be like a donkey, standing still and doing nothing until God pulled her in a particular direction. In other words, she had to be passive. But in this verse, that's not how it works. It tells us that the voice of God is behind us and we normally hear it when we deviate from the path: 'If you stray from the road to right or left, you shall hear with your own ears a voice behind you saying, This is the way; follow it'. In other words, it's a voice which tends to be quiet when you're going in the right way, but gently points you back when you start going the wrong way.

And what that means is this. Guidance is about steering us in the right direction, and you can only steer a moving bicycle. If a bike's standing still, you can't steer it. You've got to be moving. And the voice of God is there to warn you when you're about to steer in the wrong direction.

So how does the voice of God guide and warn us? Some people say they hear a sort of inner voice in their head when they pray for guidance. And sometimes God activates people's consciences, so they can't rest while they carry on pursuing a particular course of action. But when they make the right decision they have a sense of peace about it.

Sometimes it's a strong inner feeling while somebody's praying. Sometimes it's through another person saying something which challenges you. Sometimes it's through a bit of the Bible, which jumps out and you and suddenly speaks into your situation in a direct and clear way. Many, many Christians can testify to that having happened at different times in their life. I know I have.

And the safest principle with guidance is not just to rely on one single factor. Because our feelings can deceive us, or we might just be looking for justification for what we've already decided to do. The safest principle is that guidance comes when a number of these things all point in the same direction, each confirming the other.

And sometimes these things can also give us more positive guidance, as well as warning us about negatives. But the normal principle seems to be that God expects us to use the brains and critical faculties he's given us to move forward in life, but that he's right there beside us, and he's always ready to whisper words of guidance when they're needed.

I'm not an expert on aviation. But I'm told there are devices on planes which work on the same principle. As long as you're on course, you're OK, but when you deviate off course to the right or the left, a warning light and sound goes off to warn you to get back on track. That's exactly how Isaiah describes God's guidance.

But all this still leaves one big question: What if I've gone off track? What if I've made mistakes in my life and I now feel I'm miles away from where God might have wanted me to be? Well, if that's true for you I've got some good news. It's never too late as far as God's concerned. God can forgive and forget the mistakes of the past. He'll start afresh from where you are now. He'll plot a brand new course from where you are now. He's a God who offers forgiveness and new starts.

So guidance. Firstly, God guides. He's with us constantly, walking close by, and he'll never leave us. Secondly, he's just behind us, and his normal method of guidance is to give us a warning light when we start to go off course, like one of those pilot's warnings. And thirdly, we've never gone so far off course that God can't get to us. He's the God of new beginnings, who wipes away mistakes of the past, and takes us on from where we are now. And that's really good news.