

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Discernment of Spirits Diocesan Prayer Meeting Friday, July 31, 1998
7:30 p.m. Church Hall **Jer 26:1-9; Mt 13:54-58 (St. Ignatius of Loyola)**

I'd like to take a moment of silent reflection, and then I'd like to share a few thoughts.

Jeremiah is preaching the word of the Lord in the synagogue or in the Temple, and Jesus is preaching the word of God in the synagogue; and neither of them is accepted. "You must be put to death," they say to Jeremiah. And of Jesus they said, "Where did he get all this?" There is **disbelief**. Now unfortunately this translation is not very good because it says, "lack of faith." Well, lack of faith is really not the word. It's "apistis," which is related to the word—well, it's like atheism. Atheism is not the **lack** of God; it's the **denial** of God! This is not the lack of faith; although you could interpret that from this translation, it isn't right—it means the denial of faith!

And when it says that Jesus was "so upset by the lack of faith," by this denial of faith—it really says, "He marveled!" And the interesting thing about that word is it's the same word used for the people when Jesus performs miracles. It says, "He marveled!" What does that mean? It means he couldn't comprehend it! It was beyond him! It was beyond them that Jesus could heal a man born blind from birth. They marveled! Now Jesus is doing the marveling! What is he marveling at? Jesus didn't marvel when he cured the blind man. It wasn't marvelous to him. He more or less expected that. That's the way he was supposed to do it. But Jesus is marveling at disbelief. Why? It's beyond him—couldn't understand it! In his humanity it didn't make any sense: this hardness of heart, this refusal to listen, this rejection, this refusal—couldn't understand it—beyond him—beyond his human nature to understand. That's what it means. Now Jesus was confronting evil and that's what this means. The denial of faith—this belief is really evil. It's not the lack of something. For example, I don't have any water in a jar. It's empty. I lack water. It's not that kind of evil—it's not the lack of something. It's really of the disorder; it is something willful and voluntary. It is a refusal. It is a rejection. This was very disturbing.

Same thing in Jeremiah's day. Now in Jeremiah's day he was reaching the great watershed of the history of Israel: 587, when the people of Israel were actually exiled. In the study of the Old Testament this is actually an essential date because before and after—black and white—two different realities! Before the exile there was one kind of situation, after another—so much did it influence. Judaism as we know it now actually was born in the exile. Before that there was a different kind of setting that is now totally lost. It was, more or less, if I may put it so, not exactly accurately, but it was a "happy-go-lucky" time. "Well, God's on our side. We're great. What could go wrong? We got Jerusalem here and we got the Temple. We got everything. We got God. God's on our side." That was the mentality. And the exile changed that. But, of course, it was no surprise. I'm sure but it was; it actually was a terrible surprise to everybody—except that for centuries the prophets had been telling them, "Look, you people are not listening to God!" That isn't the way they would put it, because they were God's spokespersons, so they would say, "You are not listening to me!" Amos would say that meaning they are

not listening to God! Amos—what?—he was in the eight century, 700s—just 200 years, 200 years of prophesy saying, “Hey, you people are not getting the point!”

And I’ll be honest with you the writing prophets—those were the ones who were written down—they were written down for one reason—because in the exile the people said, “Guess what—they were the right ones!” And the others were the false prophets. What were the false prophets? False prophets are people who said, “Everything’s fine! God loves you! And you are going to be victorious, and everything’s going to be wonderful—and don’t worry about anything!” They were the false prophets. Now during the period up to the exile everyone thought they were the real ones, and that Jeremiah was a goof. That’s why they wanted to get rid of him. “Well, how can you say this? This is a slander. This is a terrible thing you are saying: ‘We shall be like Shiloh.’ How can you say that? We’re God’s people!” You see? That’s the way they read it! So this is an on going problem. You see? Big problem! Jeremiah, Isaiah, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Amos, Hosea—those are the writing prophets. Did I miss anybody? Who? Oh, Micah—right, right! Okay.

Now most of them actually don’t have good news! They do occasionally have a little bit; it’s called a salvation oracle. Once in a while somebody says, “Well, the Lord will save you.” But that’s usually very conditional: “Well, maybe.” But usually it’s bad news. And the prophets were sent to tell the people the bad news that they are not faithful! And because they’re not faithful the blessings are going to run out. They are going to have big trouble on their hands!

Now actually Jesus in his life found himself in the tradition of the prophets, and the Pharisees knew—they knew he was preaching to **them** bad news! Now we call it good news. Now I’ll tell you why in a minute, but it was originally bad news for certain people because they were saying, “Hey, we’ve got it made.” And Jesus says, “No, not exactly. Not exactly. You got some changes to make in your life.” He’s always saying that; “You need to change.” So it’s good news, but it’s not what people really want—the changes! It’s called in Greek “metanoia.” People who want conversion, people who want repentance—it’s good news. People who don’t want repentance—it’s bad news!

Which brings us to the feast of the day: the great St. Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius was a **great** saint, and Ignatius brought to the Church a very important teaching concerning the discernment of spirits. And that has a lot to do with whether news is good or bad. We in the Charismatic Renewal need to learn discernment of spirits because we sometimes don’t know the difference between good news and bad news. We think it’s good news, but it’s really bad news—or the other way around. Now one of the things Ignatius says about discernment is that if you have converted to God and if you have really given your heart to God, then peace in your heart is a sign of God’s presence and approval and a sign of good conscience—**IF** you’ve given yourself to God! Now if you have not given yourself to God, if you have never met him, then peace is a sign of nothing! That’s the first rule of discernment: not are you at peace, but first have you given yourself to God—then are you at peace? And if you’ve given yourself to God and you’re not, you’re restless, you’re uncertain, you’re anxious, you’re worried—that’s a

sign—let’s pray, let’s talk, seek counsel. We are not created individually—all of us wise men and women; we need the wisdom from the Spirit. We need the wisdom of the Spirit. St. Teresa of Avila said that when you are really hard up, ask the washer woman; God will use her to tell you what you need to know. She may not know what she’s saying—that’s not exactly what St. Teresa said, but she was getting at that point. But that’s true! But you do have to talk. You have to talk and you have to listen. Discernment of spirits—absolutely essential!

Now many bad things have happened in the Church because people have not discerned. They just assume. That’s different from discerning—it’s assuming. “Well, I just thought!” You see? Now the Pharisees just thought that everything that they had been taught was exactly correct and that was all they needed to know. Jesus came and told them something else. They said, “You’re wrong. Get out of here!” Jeremiah—the same thing in his day! Jeremiah was called by God—said, “Listen Jeremiah, I want you to go right to the Temple. I want you to stand there. I want you to prophesy exactly what I tell you, and say the whole thing! And don’t hold back anything!” And people there were saying, “Wait a minute! That is not right because we never heard that before!” It’s true; they never heard it before. It had been said before, but they never heard! Why? Because they weren’t listening. If we really want to be growing people, we really have to admit that there’s a lot of things we’ve never heard before. It’s not that it has never been said to us—we didn’t hear it! We have to learn how to hear—listen—it’s part of discernment.

Now for example, people can be taken away by various movements or—and I don’t want to really make a big issue about this, but I just want to use this as an example. Now it has been claimed that the Blessed Mother has appeared in various places in the world. This may or may not be true. The Church doesn’t say one way or another; therefore you can say, “Yes,” or you can say, “No.” We don’t know. Right? But then I’ve heard people say things like, “Oh, but signs have occurred!” Like what? They say, “Oh well, rosaries turn to gold.” Well, when have you ever heard of anything turning to gold in the Bible? Have you ever heard of that in the life of a saint? I never have. I just never have. So therefore if it’s a sign, it’s totally brand new—it never happened before! Is that likely that God would use something totally brand new—never happened before as a sign to authenticate something? Is it likely? It’s not likely! Is it possible? Yes! Is it likely? No!

So do we discern things: what we listen to, how we listen?—Very important! Whom we listen to! People get the idea: Well, you’re either good or you’re bad; you’re with or you’re not! That’s not true! For example, there is a woman I know who has definitely a gift of healing! She has the gift! I will testify any day to that! However, she is not a prophet. She gets very confused when she speaks. How can that be? Because there are many gifts. And we need each other. And nobody’s got all the gifts—not even the pope! And he never said he did. His gift is teaching, primarily. He’s a teacher—magisterium—he exercises the magisterium of the Church. That’s primarily his gift. And we need to listen to his gift and utilize his gift; but he never said, “Now don’t listen to anybody else, and don’t receive ministry from anybody else.” He never said that! So

we have to discern. What gifts does somebody have? If someone has a gift of healing—beautiful. Then go to that person for healing, but that doesn't mean to listen to everything that person says—they may not know. See? So we have to be very careful about this.

Another thing is, as we are aware of the fact, that the “father of lies” can work in an insidious way in the Church; that doesn't mean we're supposed to become suspicious. We don't want to become suspicious of everybody. “Oh, I don't know about Joan! I'm not sure about her! She wears that yellow...I don't know...yellow is bad”—See?—That suspicion is not from the Lord. I can tell you that! Suspicion which is a dark pall that is cast over everything and everybody that nobody—you know, “We can't trust anybody!” I don't think the Lord wants us to be suspicious. In fact, I think some people are burdened almost with a mental illness, which is a type of suspicion. You know—it's almost like they just suspect everybody—you know. It's almost like being afraid of the dark. And it really is not from the Lord.

But on the other hand, wariness—see?—is important. Why? Because we cannot be sure where the Spirit's leading us until we pray. So on the one hand—this is a middle road—on the one hand, we are supposed to be able to find what God wants us to do. God wants us to do this—very, very important. But we do have to ask the right questions. We have to use others. Okay? Two or three maybe—consultation. We have to be aware of our own fallibility—that each of us is fallible. Only the Church universally is infallible as a Church. The charism of infallibility applies to the pope when teaching as the supreme teacher of the Church, and only then. You see? As individuals we fail, so we have to be aware of this.

On the other hand, we need to have a confidence; while we're wary of error, we're confident that we are united in prayer. And I think we—I think that's a combination we have to search for. We have to seek this. And I think if we do and we're really open we're going to find the Lord asking us to step out in faith. You see? He's going to ask us to do something—and ideas are going to pop into our head—well, where did that idea come from? Well, discern where is it leading? That's what St. Ignatius would say. He didn't say, “Where did it come from?” because you can't ever know that! The devil actually could put in an idea that sounds very pious: “Oh yes, I should go home and visit my mother right this very minute.” Well, that could be from the devil because he doesn't want you to participate in something that's going to happen later on that might be very wholesome for you. See? So we can't ask where something is coming from, but where is it leading to? You can tell that. Where do these ideas lead to? If you get ideas—the Lord does it—he asks people to do things. Sometimes it will be a monetary contribution to some cause or a phone call to somebody. You know, a phone call can do a tremendous amount of good. It can advance the cause of healing people. And it really doesn't cost a great deal—does it? But some day—so we have to be very aware and attentive to what's the Lord kind of—what ideas are put in our head. St. Thomas Aquinas calls these “*gratia operans*,” usually translated “actual grace.” An idea in your mind “out of the blue”—maybe that's the Lord's invitation.

And the trouble again with a lot of spiritual people, we really don't listen to the Lord's invitation because we have our own plans. You see? We have our own plan or we have our own needs. We're always going after our own needs. **But the Lord's plan is that our needs are satisfied while we're taking care of somebody else.** That's usually the way it works. And so what happens is people are going after their own needs. They want to be nurtured. They want this; they want that—but it's really self-centered. In this coming Sunday's reading Jesus says, "Avoid greed in **all** its forms." What does that mean? Well, greed for money is only one form of greed. You see? There's other forms of greed. Wanting **anything** too much is greed, or holding onto what you've got is greed. Holding onto the good news and not letting go of it—that's greed too. You're supposed to give what you receive—give what you receive. And some don't give what they receive. Well, because they are too busy receiving something else. **Me, me, me:** well, that's greed—spiritual greed! And some people, you know, they can't get enough of something—they can't get enough grace! They want more grace. Well, that's kind of a very strange way of thinking. Grace is not a **thing** anyway; it's a **relationship!** So these are the things the Scripture suggests that we really think about and become active, become active listening to the Lord—active listeners to the word of the Lord, active responders to his impetus.