

What do you want? *Introducing spiritual direction.*

It's Christmas time!! Once again we are caught up in the bombardment of advertising, piped carols and frenetic preparations. Two images vie for attention: the huge Christmas tree piled high with presents, and often in a secondary position, a nativity setting. As Christmas approaches the question on everyone's lips is "What do you want?" This is a vexing question because, already we seem to have much more than we need and so we answer, "I don't know". All the while the merchandising message insinuates that we will not be satisfied until we have this item or that experience.

On the surface, the question "What do you want?" seems to express the ethos of our age of consumerism and self indulgence. It may come as a surprise to discover that this is a question that Jesus often asked either explicitly or implicitly. In Matthew 20:29-34 Jesus asks the blind men directly, "What do you want me to do for you?" Their answer is simple and direct, "We want to see." They were prepared to let go of their current lives as blind beggars; the predictability of begging each day with a handicap that guaranteed some income. They wanted to step into the new world of sight with all the demands that vision brings. Their desire was clear and unambiguous however in a second gospel story the rich young man is more ambivalent. In Mark 10:17-22 we meet this young man who wants a relationship with God but wants other things as well. Jesus enters into conversation with this young man, seeking to uncover what he really wants. Jesus offered the man the opportunity to change the priorities in his life or, to say this differently, to re-order his desires. In the story, it seems that he is unwilling to do that at the time, and his love of riches wins out. I always hope that some time later his desire for God will take central place in his life.

This question; "What do you want?" ... "What do you really want?" is one that Jesus continues to ask today. It is an invitation to journey into the depths of our being, to uncover what our core desires are and perhaps recognise them clearly for the first time. These deeper desires are connected to our authenticity, to the kind of people we are becoming and to our sense of vocation/call. This interior journey is often a perplexing one and difficult to make on our own. Spiritual direction, as a ministry of the church, seeks to give people opportunity to undertake this journey with an experienced guide. Such a person is called a spiritual director, guide or companion.

A spiritual director is someone who has "been on the path we are walking and knows something about it." Brian C. Taylor

What is Spiritual Direction?

"What is spiritual direction?" you may be asking. We can say that it refers to the active conversation between two people that centers on one person's relationship with God. As the conversation unfolds both the director and directee seek to recognise the action of the Holy Spirit in the directee's life. There is a God-component in all human experience even when there is pain and feelings of remoteness from God. As the directee's story is shared, the director has the task of helping the directee connect their story to **the Christ story** and thereby claim their identity in Christ.

The director is not 'better' or 'holier' than the directee but the director has agreed to put him/herself aside so that his/her total attention can be focused on the person sitting in the other chair. Many of the people who come for direction say that just being deeply listened to, has had a profound effect on their spiritual life.

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is...All moments are key moments and life itself is grace. Frederick Buechner

Discovering our Deepest Desires

Following the example of Jesus, a director can assist a person on their journey by asking simple, direct questions that can help the directee get to the heart of the matter. As with the rich, young man, the questions help the directee discover what they desire. Many people find it uncomfortable to say what they really want and need reassurance that it's alright to have desires. A process then goes on, like peeling an onion, where the layers of wants and needs are uncovered, choices made, motivations examined and desires re-ordered. Finally as the directee remains faithful to the process, they discover at the deepest level their desire for God and God's desire for them. This is a profound moment of grace in a person's life. Many people come to direction weighed down by the "shoulds" of their lives (I should pray more or better, I should know more about God, I should read the bible more, I should have more faith...) and feel that they will never measure up. It is a great relief and joy for them to discover that deep within them dwells this desire for God. It can sometimes take a long time to get to it but it is worth persevering.

I am convinced that many Christians never entertain their desires long enough to know what they really want. If we habitually suppress our wants, we may never discover the true core of our longings that can lead us more deeply into God. Janet Ruffing

I am reminded of a mother with a young family who began the direction relationship concerned that God was going to demand something from her that she was unable to give and so encountered some resistance in getting close to God. She had spent a long time re-ordering her life and family/church commitments so that she could cope with all the demands of life and maintain her own emotional health and family's well being. As we talked and reflected together, she recognized in her strong mothering instinct the passion of God as parent within her as well as an experiential realization of the depth of love that God feels for her. Now the strong feelings of mothering are a source of connection with God rather than a distraction from God. This has opened up a whole new area of possibility for how she lives her faith. This illustrates that spiritual direction is not only about growth in self knowledge that can lead us to our deepest desires and ultimately to God.

Discerning God's Invitation

It is also about discernment. "Where is God in my life?" "What is God's invitation to me now?" are two more questions at the heart of the direction process. As the person tells their story in the monthly direction sessions hints of God and God's purposes in the person's life begin to emerge. I liken this to watching a flower unfold using time-lapse photography. The unfolding of the flower is clear and obvious when everything is sped up but in real time the change is almost too slow to perceive. Over a period of time the 'monthly snapshot' of the person's life offered in the direction session begins

to reveal a pattern, a movement or direction. At some point there is a moment of recognition; “This is where God is” “That’s what God is saying” and a deeper sense of connection with God is reached.

Discernment is the ability to see the revelatory meaning in the ongoing process of one’s, or another’s life, to see “with the eyes of faith” the salvific significance of what seems like ordinary events. S. Schneidners

The second Christmas image; the nativity scene, is helpful here. This process of discernment in the directee’s life can be likened to pregnancy and giving birth with the director as midwife. One of the roles for the director here is to encourage the directee in the waiting time particularly when they feel that nothing is happening. This can be a difficult time for the directee because they have a sense of something going on in their life but nothing is clear. There can be frustration, self condemnation, resignation, confusion and simultaneously a niggle, an irritation or intuition that can not be ignored. In this gestation period, God is mysteriously bringing something new to birth in the person’s life but it is not ready to come to the light just yet. A couple of my directees are in this place at the moment. Each month, I explore a little more of the “not knowing” with them, while holding them in the deeper reality that God is at work within them. Waiting is difficult and can also be a spiritually productive time.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God... Only God could say what this new spirit forming within you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of your believing that his hand is leading you and of your accepting the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete. Teilhard de Chardin

Once the labour pains start the director is there to guide and assist the process, drawing the directee’s attention to what is unfolding in their life. The role of the midwife is to ease the birth, to help it go a little more smoothly. Again I think of a directee who had a strong sense of being called to ‘something new/ something more’ in her life but couldn’t see what it was. Over a number of months, together we explored this sense of call. In each session she articulated a little more clearly what she was feeling. As I reflected back to her what I was hearing, there was further clarity. Then in a recent session, there was the moment of birth, she knew what God’s invitation to her was. It seemed so obvious now it had arrived that she wondered why she hadn’t seen it sooner but the journey to that point had prepared her, so, like Mary, she was ready to say “Yes”.

The spiritual midwife is humble, always clear about her own identity and role in the drama of birthing. For spiritual directors the Holy Spirit is the true director.
Margaret Guenther

Seeing as God Sees

This also illustrates another aspect of spiritual direction. The interior journey, that we make together in the direction process, is not only about developing a deeper relationship with God. It has a prophetic edge to it. In direction we are invited to see as God sees, to become seers. Initially we see our own lives, “the good, the bad and the ugly” of them, through the lens of God’s loving gaze. Once we begin to see ourselves as God see us, then we begin to look at others, our world, with God’s eyes. This new way of seeing connects with our deepest desires and we begin to recognize

God's invitation to respond to God's love in ways that are just, healing and reconciling for all creation.

Why Come to spiritual direction?

There are many reasons why people come for spiritual direction. For some it is a spiritual practice which supports their faith life in an ongoing way. For others, ordinary life transitions can be so confusing and pain-filled that they lose direction. The death of a loved one, job loss, divorce, chronic illness – any of these may cause them to question the meaning of life and yearn for hope. Spiritual direction is often sought in such times of crisis. Others struggle to believe that God awaits them, ever present, and not only in their prayer times or when they are 'good'. In spiritual direction people became aware of the reality of God present in all aspects of their lives. Spiritual direction is an open-ended process that seeks to reveal a person's own inner wisdom in order to be attentive to the spiritual journey. This is a life long process.

As Christmas approaches this year, I invite you to spend a little time with the question "What do you really want?" You may discover a treasure that's the real present of Christmas.

If you would like to know more about spiritual direction, contact Sue Dunbar at Barnabas Ministries Inc. P: 6295 6766 or E: suedunbar53@yahoo.com

About Sue Dunbar

Sue is the new director of Barnabas Ministries Inc now that Ross Kingham has retired. Sue has expertise in spiritual direction and supervision as well as many years experience as a presenter and workshop leader. Prior to coming to Canberra she spent 5 years in the Mid Lachlan Mission Area introducing and facilitating process of spiritual formation

Books used in preparing this article

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