

CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A TIME OF CATASTROPHE¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the First Sunday of Advent, 28 November 2021

The music for the beginning of Advent is striking. We sing the great Lutheran hymn, “Wachet Auf”—“Wake, O wake”.² We also sing Charles Wesley’s hymn, “Lo, he comes with clouds descending” to the tune, *Helmsley*, chosen for it by the author himself.³ Taken together, these two hymns urge us to be alert for the coming of the Christ; not, as we might expect, the coming at Christmas, but the second coming, the final fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. Well, we’ve been waiting for some time since the days of Jesus. By our own actions, we may be closer to it than we desire and not in any way that we anticipated. So, perhaps we should take a few minutes this morning to set our thoughts in order.

Two weeks ago, our gospel reading was Mark 13:1-11, where Jesus comments on the destruction of the temple. Father John led us through its apocalyptic language. Our reading from Luke this morning is in effect a continuation of that reading from Mark. Matthew has a parallel reading. Scholars think that the version in Mark is the original.⁴

We may be a little at sea if we do not know what immediately precedes the verses that we have heard read. This is what Luke says from verse 20:

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfilment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

There is no break in the text, so our reading follows on directly from what went before. We need to understand that apocalyptic language was a means of talking about climactic events. Great human events were associated with great natural events. Indeed, in the extended passage, Jesus begins by using human responses to the fate of Jerusalem and then goes on to the cosmic.

Despite all this, Jesus was not directly prophesying that Jerusalem would fall. It did fall in 70AD, when it was destroyed by Titus. Its fall was complete, total destruction. Jesus was saying that, if things went on as they did, this would be the result. It is as though someone with insight said, at the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War, that, if the Allies treated the Germans as they intended and did, some terrible reaction would follow. Such insight was prediction, not prophesy.

By expressing his thoughts in apocalyptic language, Jesus was calling the events “earth shattering”. And the actual events were earth shattering for the Jews. The Temple was

¹ Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-11; Luke 21:25-38

² *New English Hymnal* (NEH), 16

³ NEH 9

⁴ In preparing this sermon, I have been helped by: Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: a Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, New York, Orbis, 2017; Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, London, SPCK, 2001; Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, London SPCK, 2001; Tom Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, London, SPCK, 1996; Craig S Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (2nd ed), Downers Grove, IVP Press, 2014

destroyed, the whole sacrificial system swept away, never to be re-established. Jewish worship shifted from the Temple to the synagogue; a diaspora settled across the world.

Let us imagine some scenarios with which we might be more familiar. Think of the Gadigal people watching the First Fleet as it sailed into Port Jackson in January 1788. They had then no knowledge of who these people were and from whence they came. Nevertheless, as they watched, their world was forever changed. Their land was taken from them. They were ravaged with previously unknown diseases. Their earth was shattered. For them the apocalyptic language was appropriate.

Let us imagine the Jewish population of Europe on 30 January 1933, the day on which Paul von Hindenburg, then President of Germany, appointed Adolph Hitler chancellor. On that day, their earth was shattered. On that day they numbered about 9,500,000. By 1945, 2/3 of them had been destroyed. For them the apocalyptic language was appropriate.

If we come to the present day, we might think that the apocalyptic language is appropriate to describe the fires and floods of the last few years. We expect these events, the product of climate change, to continue. Many wonder whether it is proper to bring children into such a doomed world. In this they echo the words of Jesus, “Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!”

In all three gospels, the words of Jesus about the fall of Jerusalem include warnings about false prophets, those who would purport to interpret what was happening.⁵ In *The Tablet* of 23 September 2021, Philip Jenkins of Baylor University in Texas wrote an article entitled “Climate catastrophe and the future of faith”. I will attach a copy of the article to the online version of this sermon.

In this article, Jenkins identifies a number of climate crises with significant effects on religious belief and behaviour. From the 13th to the 19th centuries, the world suffered what has become known as the “Little Ice Age”.⁶ In the northern hemisphere, particularly cold periods occurred in the 14th and 17th centuries. Around 1320, Christian Europe began to identify scapegoats, including witches. The standards for witch trials were set at that time. Certain religious groups, including Spiritual Franciscans, were identified as malicious actors. In Islamic societies of the time, Christians bore the wrath of the population.

Between 1309 and 1814, the River Thames froze 23 times. In 1683-1684, it remained frozen for two months. Fairs were held on the ice. This time coincided with the persecution of Catholics. The middle of the 18th century also saw extreme cold. At this time, the Great Awakening occurred in the USA under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield.

Might we think that our current climate crisis will have some similar effects? We have noticed a growth in conspiracy theories in recent times. Social media transmits those views in a way not before possible. Jesus clearly linked false prophets with apocalyptic events. The term “false prophets” seems rather benign, but we know that falsehoods are powerful instruments of public policy and private behaviour.

⁵ Matthew 24:23-25; Mark 13:21-23; Luke 21:8

⁶ [Little Ice Age - Wikipedia](#)

Since we know that large scale changes in our environment change us, and using the example of rising sea levels, Jenkins asks,

... if climate change reshapes the world so thoroughly as to make, in effect, a new kind of humanity, what will those future generations think and feel? What kind of faith, or faiths, will exist in a drowned world?

We might expect a rise in religious fundamentalism encouraged possibly by the apocalyptic language of the Revelation to John. Conspiracy theories may well try to identify present day persons who, they claim, represent the evil symbolic persons in that book. That is, we may see a rise in scapegoating of a severe kind.

In the same issue of *The Tablet*, Sister Gemma Simmonds had an article called “Becoming who we are”. I do not know whether any connection between the two articles was in the mind of the magazine’s editors, but Simmonds’ article, which followed that by Jenkins, took up the theme of discernment, which reflects the warning that Jesus gave about the fall of Jerusalem. I will also attach this article to the online version of my sermon.

Simmonds says:

From the moment we wake up to the moment when we fall asleep, we are making choices, some of them trivial and incidental, others involving the building up or deconstructing of good or bad habits that may have a significant impact on the rest of our lives. How we choose to live our daily lives, even in the small details, can play a major role in how we either grow into the fullest version of who God created us to be, or dwindle and diminish into a shell of that person.

Few people get out of bed in the morning and idly decide to get married, start up a company, commit a murder or cheat on their spouse or partner. Both positive and negative decisions are usually the cumulative build-up over time of smaller choices that might appear insignificant in themselves.

Simmonds calls the process by which we grow or diminish “discernment”. Jesus refers directly to this process when, in this morning’s gospel, he tells the parable of the fig tree, encouraging us to be alert, in effect, discerning.

Simmonds suggests that our capacity for discernment involves our own internal habits of prayer and reflection as well adequate information, self-knowledge and “the ability to integrate dreams and desires with the reality of the lived context”. She also suggests that we need the support of a caring community.

If these are apocalyptic times, similar to those faced by the Jewish people as the destruction of the Temple approached, we will need, as Jesus told us, to be awake, to keep our community strong and be secure enough to reject the false prophets.

Some advice from T S Eliot in his “Four Quartets”:

When there is distress of nations and perplexity
Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road.
Men’s curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given

And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.⁷

⁷ T S Eliot, *Four Quartets*. [Four Quartets - 3 The Dry Salvages \(davidgorman.com\)](http://davidgorman.com)



The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem (1850)

David Roberts (1796-1864)

Chromolithograph by Louis Haghe (1806-1885) based on Robert's painting of 1848. The location of the original has been unknown since 1861



Triumphal parade in Rome of articles looted from Jerusalem in 70AD
Rome, Arch of Titus (c81AD)

THE TABLET

23 SEPTEMBER 2021,

Climate catastrophe and the future of faith

by Philip Jenkins

COP26 briefing



Albrecht Dürer's woodcut print of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, 1498
Photo: Alamy/Incamerastock

Over the centuries, religions have been dramatically reshaped by sudden climate shifts. As the world faces an unprecedented ecological crisis, a historian sees the possible emergence of new religious movements and new faiths

Climate change and global warming are now an inescapable feature of the headlines, and that presence will only increase as the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP26, draws closer. Whether arising from titanic volcanic eruptions, growing or shrinking levels of solar activity, or from changes in the El Niño cycle in the oceans, disasters arising from sudden climate shifts have remade history and have reshaped the world's religions.

These climate shocks have had a terrifying impact on the lives of ordinary people. When temperatures fell and farming became all but impossible, the results were swift and devastating. Famines and attendant plagues killed millions, while terrified and angry people sought scapegoats to blame for the mounting horrors they saw around. Rebellions, civil wars and massacres readily followed such climate crises. The Four Horsemen of Revelation rode

unchecked. History offers a stark warning of some of the consequences we are likely to face in the near future.

There have been climate emergencies every century or so, but some were especially harrowing. One occurred around the year 1320, at the start of the Little Ice Age. That era is best remembered for the wild flowering of paranoia and conspiracy theories directed against outsiders and imaginary enemies of all kinds – against Jews, witches, lepers and heretics. In Catholic Europe, this was the time when the Church formally approved the theory that witchcraft was not just an underhand kind of supernatural malice, but a whole alternate religion of evil, with its satanic pacts and sabbats. The first of what would become the standard model of witch trials occurred at Kilkenny in 1324. This was also the time that extremely pious critics of the Church's wealth found themselves condemned as heretics to be sought out and slaughtered: inquisitors literally demonised groups like the Spiritual Franciscans and the Beguines. Meanwhile, Islamic societies decided that it was the Christians who were inciting divine anger, and they inflicted ruinous purges and persecutions on the once mighty Churches of Egypt and Mesopotamia. For societies around the world, the years around 1320 were unforgettably horrible.

Another time of catastrophe followed in the decade after 1675, when the world entered a time of terrifying cold, with all that implied for food shortages, epidemic disease and mass death. This was the darkest and coldest depth of that notorious Little Ice Age. Once again, different societies identified different people to blame for the ongoing disasters. The French government of Louis XIV decided that Protestant Huguenots were the culprits, and persecution followed. It was in the British Isles that the readiness to believe the worst had some of the grimmest consequences. This was the time of the Popish Plot, which brought so many Catholic clergy and faithful laity to execution or imprisonment. The idea that Catholics were traitors and conspirators was of course nothing new, but it was in the appalling circumstances of the years around 1679 that anti-papist demagogues found credulous audiences. Of course, the priests must be removed or killed: how else could God's anger be sated? On the Welsh borders, we hear of Jesuits literally being hunted to their deaths in the deep snows of the dreadful winters of the time.

Beyond paranoia and scapegoating, such climate crises also inspired new leaders and religious movements that sought to understand the apocalyptic signs of the times, when God's judgement was so overwhelmingly obvious. In terms of extreme cold, the years between 1739 and 1741 were among the worst of the millennium for the transatlantic world. This was the pivotal era of the mighty religious upsurge that is called the Great Awakening, when celebrity preachers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield created mighty movements whose descendants are still with us today, in the form of the evangelical Churches. Edwards told his hearers, unforgettably, that they were "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God": and looking at the world around them in 1741, who could have doubted such a simple statement of reality?

Time and again, if you look at the great revolutionary eras that transformed religious life and thought, that spawned so many movements, you repeatedly find that these coincided closely with a climate-driven crisis. But however terrifying they were at the time, those past crises were fundamentally different from our circumstances today. Above all, they were transient and temporary, and ended when, for instance, the effects of a volcanic eruption had played themselves out. This time is different. Unless human beings take decisive action, and on a massive scale, our current climate trends are in one direction, towards ever warmer temperatures. The only real issue is just how bad things will get. Historically, we know that a sudden temperature change of only a degree or so Celsius can have catastrophic effects. By

some scenarios, we might be looking at a three- or four-degree increase by the end of the century. The obvious and most often mentioned consequences include rising sea levels, the spread of deserts, threats to food supplies and drinkable water and growing confrontations between communities. Economically advanced states will find it easier to withstand or delay extreme crises; poorer and more fragile communities in the Global South will suffer most, and some are facing catastrophe.

So much is well known, but the religious dimension to the coming crisis is often neglected. One key moment in the public acknowledgement of the climate crisis came in 2015, when Pope Francis made environmental and climate threats a central theme of his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. What was less widely noticed at the time was just how closely this concern was related to the world's emerging religious geography. Over the past half-century, the proportion of the world's Christians living in the Global South, and especially within the Tropics, has grown enormously. By 2050, Africa alone will have over a billion Christians, around a third of the world total. The southward drift is all the more marked for the Roman Catholic Church, which currently finds its largest centres of population in Brazil, Mexico and the Philippines, and with explosive centres of growth in African countries such as Nigeria, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The emerging Christian world coincides exactly with the territories most sharply and immediately affected by climate change. The climate crisis is a human nightmare, but it has a particularly Christian – and Catholic – tinge.

Based on historical precedents, one near-certain consequence of a climate-driven disaster will be a quest for the malefactors thought to be responsible. In most African societies, witchcraft is a deeply established cultural reality, one that has not vanished with modernisation and the growth of cities. In recent decades, witch-hunts and persecutions have been just as likely to erupt in sprawling cities and shanty towns as in villages. There is no reason to believe that such paranoia would be any less in a decade or two, particularly if economic circumstances are as badly affected as is commonly believed. Perhaps the great age of literal witch-hunts lies in our future, not our past. Another inevitable consequence of climate-driven catastrophe would be a steep rise in interfaith tensions, most obviously between Muslims and Christians, but also affecting Hindus and Buddhists in their respective countries. Social or environmental collapse will not come overnight, but it is not hard to contemplate the structural impact of diminishing resources. In multiple nations, we would expect violent tugs of war over the remaining fertile lands and water supplies. Across Africa's Western Sahel, throughout the vast region of Africa's Great Lakes, environmental crisis threatens to provoke calamitous waves of religious wars and persecutions and pogroms.

Communal tensions contribute to the rise of militias, movements and parties, which become revolutionary challenges to states. Commonly, those groups define themselves in religious terms and justify themselves by attacking not just rival faith communities but also other members of the same faith who are seen as deviant or less committed. Attitudes and actions that would once have been unthinkable gain mass support at a time of hunger, social stress and political breakdown. Just look at the spread of extreme fundamentalist and jihadi ideas across West Africa in the past two decades, in a region already very hard hit by warming and threats to water. From the point of view of the Global North, such conflicts in tropical regions have often been viewed distantly, at best as problems demanding charitable outreach or relief. But matters will be very different in our near future because of the role of mass migrations on an unprecedented scale. If and when tropical lands succumb to ruin – when the deserts spread and the cities sink – their former residents will not simply remain in place to die. They will move, in their hundreds of millions.

Almost certainly, the coming crises will produce new religious movements, and even, conceivably, whole new faiths. As in earlier times, we would expect a powerful thirst for religious explanations of the ongoing disasters, and a fresh openness to apocalyptic and -millenarian preaching. As in the colonial America of 1741, the evidence for God's furious judgement would be plain to see, as would the utter inadequacy of human solutions.

So what messages will those humbled sinners be willing to accept? Repeatedly in earlier crises, the Book of Revelation has seized the attention of Christians. In the closing chapters of that work, the visionary of Revelation promises his hearers a glorious future when "there was no more sea" and that much-wished consummation heralds the coming of the New Jerusalem. The time may yet come when believers would so dread the rising seas that they would grasp desperately at promises that those lethal dangers might cease or even vanish altogether. That biblical narrative is also fundamentally concerned with escape and exodus, migration and exile, which will be very familiar to this near-future world.

Migrants and refugees from those regions will increasingly carry their ideas and beliefs, their visions and dreams, far beyond the region, to Europe and worldwide. Already, population movements have had a very sizable religious impact on the Global North, through the spread of Islam across Europe, and at the same time the global diffusion of African patterns of Christian belief and practice. Global South patterns increasingly join the religious mainstream of the North and will eventually dominate it. At the least, newer waves of religious refugees and exiles will continue and accelerate those trends, and they will bring their memories of parched ground, failing cities and dying landscapes. What remains to be seen is just how novel and radical will be the beliefs of those refugees from apocalypse.

My own interest in these matters predates the emergence of global warming as a critical menace. In saying that, I am claiming no status as a prodigy, still less a prophet. I just read a great deal of science fiction, and I was stunned by J.G. Ballard's 1962 novel *The Drowned World*. This legendary book imagines a twenty-second-century world in which global temperatures have soared, the glaciers have melted and what civilisation does survive chiefly exists in the Arctic and Antarctic. Once-temperate lands such as Britain have been engulfed by rising seas and have succumbed to tropical conditions. The point of Ballard's story was to imagine how human consciousness changes in that radically changed environment: if climate change reshapes the world so thoroughly as to make, in effect, a new kind of humanity, what will those future generations think and feel? What kind of faith, or faiths, will exist in a drowned world? Many years later, those questions are more pressing than ever.

Philip Jenkins is distinguished professor of history at Baylor University and the author of Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval, Oxford University Press.

THE TABLET23

SEPTEMBER 2021

Discernment - becoming who we are

by Gemma Simmonds



Gemma Simmonds

Pope Francis often talks of ‘discernment’. It is not only the engine of decision-making in the synodal process throughout the Church, which begins next month – it is vital to living and choosing well in our everyday lives

From the moment we wake up to the moment when we fall asleep, we are making choices, some of them trivial and incidental, others involving the building up or deconstructing of good or bad habits that may have a significant impact on the rest of our lives. How we choose to live our daily lives, even in the small details, can play a major role in how we either grow into the fullest version of who God created us to be, or dwindle and diminish into a shell of that person.

Few people get out of bed in the morning and idly decide to get married, start up a company, commit a murder or cheat on their spouse or partner. Both positive and negative decisions are usually the cumulative build-up over time of smaller choices that might appear insignificant in themselves. We make our major life decisions in linear time, on a particular date, but we also go on constantly reiterating and refining or reshaping these decisions as we grow and change. We make decisions and then spend time growing into them. Many of us make life promises without any real notion of what the living out of those promises might entail. Only time and experience teach us what we have taken on. We live in a permanent state of becoming, so that the more we live, the more we become the person we are in the process of turning into.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses presents the people with a stark choice: will they choose to live in relationship with God (life and prosperity) or will they go their own way (death and adversity)? He urges them to “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Believing in God does not give us a safe package deal on how to live a trouble-free existence, but faith gives us the assurance that the Holy Spirit is at work within us and, by nature, we have the capacity to make choices which are in tune with the mind of God.

One word for getting things into better focus is “discernment”. It is a way to practise making choices in small things so that listening for the voice of the Spirit becomes a habit of awareness and reflectiveness which will serve us well when it comes to the bigger choices as well as the general orientation of our lives. The Covid-19 pandemic has pulled many people’s lives apart in ways that were experienced as shattering and destructive. But while this has had lasting and devastating consequences, it has also provided some opportunities for rebalancing lives that had become oppressive in subtle ways.

How do we develop a capacity for discernment? Making well-discerned choices generally requires a regular habit of serious prayer and reflection; it also requires the ordinary human elements of adequate information: weighing reasons for and against a particular option and confirmation over time. A discerning person needs to be equipped with self-knowledge, self-acceptance, the ability to integrate dreams and desires with the reality of the lived context and the validation that comes from sharing these thought processes with wise and trusted friends and companions.

In discernment, our desires matter. An image of God that tells us we are not allowed to have desires of our own will not help us make good decisions, any more than will our using God to legitimise whatever our plans may be. Finding out what we truly want and being willing to engage with those desires can be a challenge, especially if we are not used to connecting with our desires. Equally, we may find ourselves being invited to let go of certain dreams and desires if they have become rigid and compulsive.

In the garden of Gethsemane, we see Jesus afraid, not wanting to die. He admits this to himself and his Father, but places himself trustfully into the Father’s hands. Paradoxically, this handing over of his own will leads to the freedom and authority that he displays through his entire trial and Crucifixion. If our desires matter, then our questions also matter; whether they be practical/information questions, without which we cannot make a well-grounded choice, or our own inner questions, denoting a level of uncertainty or misgiving. A key part of discernment is to know what lies at the heart of our questions. Are there fears and anxieties there, an inability to let go and walk forwards in trust? The fact that we are uncertain does not always carry negative implications. It may be that, in our heart of hearts, we don’t want to make a choice that has been wished on us by others or by circumstances. If we have not been used to having our own desires taken seriously, we may need to find courage to admit to ourselves that we have preferences. If we have always been used to being the decision-maker, we may need to become more sensitive to the unspoken hopes, fears or objections of others.

Having adequate information and reliable self-knowledge is a crucial part of making trustworthy decisions. But sometimes we have to make a leap of faith, based not on rational thought so much as on intuition. In this sense, we need to learn to take our instincts and intuitions seriously. If we have had a “sort of feeling” over a long period or recognise a pattern of orientation towards a particular choice that will not let go of us, it is worth exploring this as the guiding light of God’s Spirit. It may also be worth taking our dreams seriously in this context as they reveal from our unconscious mind hidden desires or fears that can be essential data in our decision-making. We may also need to pay attention to unadmitted negative feelings. Reason and imagination are not opposites: they are different faculties of the mind that enable us to get in touch with responses to God’s grace which are both affective and the fruit of careful consideration. Our body must also be taken seriously in a process of discernment. All sense experience is data for discernment and most of it comes to us first through our bodies, which can be a source of God’s revelation. Even our language tells us something important about the wisdom carried by our bodies. When we talk about being “unable to swallow”

something, “feeling choked” about something, or something “being a pain” or “giving us a headache”, we may be speaking figuratively but also revealing a point of tension within the physical self that reveals unresolved conflicts and anxieties to which the conscious mind is not yet attuned. All of this needs to be taken into account if we are to make reliable choices.

However hard we try to discern according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, time and experience may prove that we were mistaken in our judgement in a given instance. It may simply be that circumstances are beyond our control and we cannot make “the right choice”; we can only make the least bad choice. Sometimes we gain greater wisdom from our failures and mistakes than from our successes. This, in its own way, is a form of discernment, when we learn to put our trust in God, whatever the outcome. Confirmation of a choice made can be found in the Scriptures and in the doctrine and moral teaching of the Church. It can also be found in the wisdom and experience of the faith community or that of family, colleagues and friends. It takes courage and inner freedom to face the answer, but we can ask ourselves what the most frequent criticism is when we receive it.

There are other factors that can be an obstacle to good discernment. Poor physical or emotional health might suggest that we need sufficient rest and relaxation or recovery time to enable us to pray and reflect seriously. The aftermath of a major loss or bereavement, or the breakdown of a significant relationship, is not a good context for making choices and decisions requiring inner freedom. It is important that we take our emotions seriously before engaging in discernment. We may have formed attachments or compulsions that prevent us from being able to exercise freedom of mind and will. This is also important when it comes to having rigid attitudes, whether they be patterns of religious thinking or prejudices to which we cling. We may have become disconnected from feelings and memories that make us feel uncomfortable, or we may have got out of practice in using our imagination. This will make the charting of our affective responses difficult, as will being dominated by fears and anxieties or social and cultural factors that make it hard for us to think broadly.

The development of a discerning heart is something that happens over a long period of time. Some people enter into retreat or a time of discernment with the express purpose of coming to a momentous decision. Sometimes it turns out that they are not so much coming to a decision as coming to accept and acknowledge a decision already made, though that news has not yet reached their brain. It is often best not to focus on the decision itself, but to “park” it in a corner, where it can be acknowledged and treated with respect but not made the sole focus of attention. When the time is right, the choice often emerges organically, without having had to become the focus of a specific or separate process. It’s as if the decision creeps up on us and makes its presence felt without us having noticed that we are making it.

Adapted from *Dancing at the Still Point: Retreat Practices for a Busy Life* (SPCK).

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