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Spirituality

Is prayer at the heart of ministry?

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Introduction

In this essay I seek to demonstrate that ordained ministry (specifically in the order of the presbyterate¹) is a calling to a way of being human, at the centre of which is union with God. This union with God can only be achieved through prayer, and specifically contemplative prayer.

Ministry

Is prayer at the heart of ministry? Eugene Peterson in *The Gift: Reflections on Christian Ministry*² recognises that many pastors find themselves too busy to make space for prayer in their overflowing schedules. He offers two reasons for their busyness: they are both vain (they want to appear important) and lazy (by allowing other to dictate to them how they should spend their time). He offers three activities which he believes to be fundamental to the role of minister: prayer, preaching and listening³ (pp.19-22). In *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* he offers a similar list (prayer, reading Scripture and giving spiritual direction⁴) in response to his criticism that many pastors have become 'religious shopkeepers' more interested in running a church than seeking a kingdom, and keeping a community attentive to God. These tasks are unbusy, quiet and involve being attentive: attentive to God, to oneself and to others.

Ordained Christian ministry is not a task, but a calling in which he or she offers their whole selves to God to serve their community as a response to their love of God. Priests are not primarily heralds of faith but icons of a particular way of being human, that is Christ's way of being human. This requires an openness to God, holding nothing back from Him. There is a risk in this, at least we interpret it as a risk. The risk is that we losing everything that we gather around us, possessions, comforts, psychological traits behind which we hide. This involves our facing up to who we really are in the light of God. In short it requires us to live on the 'cutting edge of reality' being blown where the Spirit takes us (cf. John 3:8). Ministry is therefore not about 'doing' so much as 'being'. In standing alongside those who come to us for help or support we are able to say that it is okay to feel dislocated and that God is journeying with them in their uncertainty, He has not abandoned them, He is the God who led Israel through the wilderness for forty years. Our task, if we have one, is to risk taking that journey with them in the knowledge that we may be destroyed in the process, and to encourage those with whom we journey to attend to God and to themselves. That task requires space and a need for contemplative prayer, the prayer of silence - being addressed by God.

One's preparation for this kind of ministry involves not principally learning the disciplines of critical academic theology (though that is important), or understanding new techniques of

¹ While I acknowledge that the term 'ministry' refers to all the baptised I have chosen to focus on the ordained priesthood to help me clarify my ideas about it as I continue to explore my own priestly formation.

² I first encountered this book under its previously published title of *The Contemplative Pastor*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989

³ Eugene Peterson, *The Gift*, (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995) pp.19-22

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993) p.3

church management, or the like, but simply the ability to *listen*. In order to be faithful to Christ the priest will need to be attentive to the voice of God in the here and now, in the nitty-gritty of everyday life. The priest, I believe, needs to be a man or woman of prayer, first and foremost. This discipline of prayer is not just a repetitive recitation of the daily office (though that does offer continuity and discipline, and the opportunity to discover something new in the familiar, cf. Amos 7:7 "Amos, what do you see?") but a regular and disciplined waiting in the presence of God, allowing God to transform him or her into the likeness of Christ. This is a discipline which needs to be developed long before the priest dons their first dog-collar, and it does not stop once ordained: Christianity is a lifelong process of transformation into the likeness of Christ.

Person of Prayer

One of the first and most influential books I have read on priesthood was by Michael Hollings. In his book *Living Priesthood* he devotes the whole of his second chapter to "Priest: Person of Prayer", he writes:

The centre and core of the whole priestly life is the relationship with God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I mean that this relationship is to be so deep, strong and all-pervading that it is the very pulse, life-blood, heart of his whole being. Without it, he is empty, a functionary only, wrongly balanced and so ineffective.

To this you could say - Yes, but that is what every Christian should be, where every Christian should have his life centred. And I would agree with you, and say that this is why all baptised are to a lesser degree or in a lesser kind of priesthood. And I would sing many an Alleluia if we could find this attitude in the average Christian....

...Because life is what the human being is all about, the old cliché that "holiness is wholeness" fits well, and is deeply true. That the whole man should be taken up in priesthood is self-evident, because THE priest is Jesus Christ, and our share of priesthood takes its origin from him. He was entirely given up to the will of his Father,For the priest God must be central to his whole being. *God's will is the priest's touchstone; God's love is his driving force and inspiration through the gift of the Spirit; his greatest desire is to be so one with God that it is God who lives and loves through him and so does the work.* Once this centrality is lost, once another love or interest purges God to the periphery, the whole balance and texture of priestly life is altered. It could be said that he had not only lost direction but lost the "essence" of priesthood. Yet today how often the average priest sees his life in pastoral terms. His work for God is immediately in visiting, meetings, administration. He is fully, and generally energetically, engaged from morning till night on "the things of God", with very little time for God himself, because "someone had to do them". Prayer is fitted in as and when possible so as not to interfere with the business of life. Such priests are good men, hard working men. They are devoted to their parishes and their parishioners. They are doing their very best for them.

The sad fact is that the weight of work has thrown them off balance. The priest is nobody, has no power, is empty no matter how hard he works, if he is not given over to God in the Spirit... [My] thesis is simply the need to allow God the first place in the mind, heart and strength of the priest. [my italics]⁵

⁵ Michael Hollings, *Living Priesthood*, Great Wickering: McCrimmons, 1994, pp.43-45

Contemplation

While there are many kinds of prayer, prayers arising out of need, out of pain and astonishment, the kind of prayer which needs to be at the heart of the priest's prayer life I believe is contemplative prayer, silent prayer. Contemplative prayer is not R.S. Thomas's *Folk Tale* kind of praying, flung like gravel at the window of heaven to attract God's attention⁶, but prayer which allows encounter with God - I-THOU prayer, Buber might say - in which I find that I am rooted in God, I find my purpose and will in God's will - in which and through which I allow God to transform me into His likeness so that I may be Christlike, so that I may be Christ to another. It is prayer which allows God to reach into the heart of who I am and change me. It is disciplined (ascetical) prayer.

Thomas Merton on contemplative prayer writes:

contemplation is the work of the Holy Ghost acting on our souls through His gifts of Wisdom and Understanding with special intensity to increase and perfect our love for Him. These gifts are part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity.⁷

It is

deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love - a union in which we learn things about Him that those who have not received such a gift will never discover until they enter heaven⁸

Merton identifies two types of contemplative prayer, Mystical or Passive contemplation, and Active contemplation, though he acknowledges that the word used in its strictest sense refers mystical contemplation, sometimes called 'infused' contemplation. Mystical contemplation is "a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental contact with him."⁹ It is a recognition that the greatest joy is to love God, and that God has given Himself to us and therefore love is all that matters. Contemplation therefore involves a gradual self-emptying of oneself so that it is no longer me, but Christ within me. This is a gift from God, and though is freely offered to all Christians, not all reach this stage. The second kind of contemplation, 'active contemplation' is perhaps more accessible, and this kind of contemplation, at least, should be sought by those in ministry. In fact Merton writes, "Passive contemplation is not demanded of all Christians. But at least *some* active contemplation would appear to be, in practice if not in theory *absolutely essential to a truly Christian life.*"¹⁰ Active contemplation demands our

thought and action and acts of will. Its function is to awaken and prepare the mind, to turn the heart towards God, to arouse a desire to know God better and to rest in Him. It introduces the soul to the joys of the spiritual life. It gives him a healthy taste for the things of the supernatural order and weans him away from the satisfactions of the body and of merely natural knowledge.

Above all, active contemplation prepares the way for love. It teaches obedience and humility. It shows a man how to seek God in His will. It makes the soul attentive to

⁶ cf. R.S. Thomas' poem *Folk Tale* which begins "Prayers like gravel / Flung at the sky's / window, hoping to attract / the loved one's / attention."

⁷ Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?*, Whathamstead: Anthony Clarke Books, 1975, p.89

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.90

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.98

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.96

God's presence and His desires. It teaches one to think about God instead of about the world, to desire to please God rather than to enjoy the satisfactions of the world. It shows us how to trust God and leads us on to abandon ourselves more and more to Him.¹¹

Conclusion

Prayer, the way we respond to being, which is ultimately a response to God is at the centre of our humanity. Priesthood, as an image of a particular way of being human offers to people in that availability to people we call ministry that incarnational way of life modelled by Christ whereby God is expressed in humanity. Contemplative prayer, whether active or passive, involves self-disclosure and an abandonment to God of those comforts behind which we mask our true selves, so that eventually we are left standing open and vulnerable before God, able to live with the uncertainties that our lives, both interior and exterior present. It is this openness to God which enables us to stand alongside those in need. Prayer *is* at the heart of ministry.

Bibliography

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¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.96