

# Mission and the Priesthood of Christ

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**O**ne does not have to hang around the church very long to hear some weird stuff.<sup>1</sup> For example, when I converted to Protestantism, one of the dominant narratives as I picked it up – usually via some kind of epistemological osmosis but sometimes quite explicitly – was that the incarnation was God’s attempt to get the reconciliation ball rolling; that Jesus had laid the foundations for reconciliation and then he had gone back to heaven to sit down next to God in the great lounge room in the sky to watch over how events would pan out. But just before his exodus, Jesus formed a little community who would work as subcontractors to the big boss upstairs. And foreman Jesus trusted this community to carry on his work while he was away, promising to turn up again when the job was nearly done just to check that it had all been done according to his instructions. And what this means, I’ve often heard, is that if God’s costly work in Jesus is to make any real difference in the world then we need to get off our bums and make sure that we get everyone we know into a home group or along to a church service or, at the very least, reading a book or watching a DVD that communicates in graphic terms just how warm one’s future existence is going to be unless one prays some magic words.

In other words, according to this narrative, although God had once been personally invested in this little project called “creation”, God had now essentially taken a back seat to the whole programme. God is now a bit like a corporation’s founding director who still serves on the board in a sort of honorary position but who has really relinquished the right to call the shots – the shareholders now do that. More seriously, in this plot, the church’s central claims about God – namely that God is triune and that God has, in Jesus Christ, embraced a fully human existence – make little if any practical difference in how we think and go about being a faithful community. This is a profound problem.

About 25 years ago, I came across a remarkable essay on the place of Jesus Christ in worship.<sup>2</sup> Therein, the Scottish theologian James Torrance suggested that God had made creation to be something like an orchestra for God’s glory and that human beings were created to conduct that orchestra, to lead the orchestra as the priests of creation in divine praise. And the reason that the whole creation is groaning in universal travail, Torrance argued, is because creation’s priests have miserably failed to fulfil their vocation. But rather than abandon God’s purposes for humanity and for creation, God comes in Christ as a second Adam to be the Priest of Creation, to do for humanity

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what humanity fails to do; to offer to God the worship and the praise that the sons and daughters of Eve have failed to offer; to be creation's worship leader who carries on his loving heart the joys and sorrows and prayers and conflicts of all God's creatures so that he might reconcile all things to God. To be truly human, therefore, is to participate in the life of this particular identity.

Torrance's presentation of the good news articulates grace's deep penetration into our broken humanity; we see that God has assumed our humanity in all its fallenness and has refused to be fallen in it and that Jesus's offering of praise and obedience carries all of creation into the healing freedom of God. This is what his priesthood means: that here at last is a true human being, given by God, who sets up shop inside the perversion and disorder of a diseased creation and who step-by-step, blow-by-blow, moment-by-moment, loves God with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength and in doing so leads creation in fitting worship which then transforms the human condition from the inside out.

So what does this mean for our life together and for our worship? It means that we are never abandoned to work out life on our own. It means that our life and worship is preceded by an act that makes our life and worship possible. It means that our life and our worship are at core about participation in the life of another. It does not mean that each of us can be our own private priest exercising our own private arrangements with God. Rather, it means that our worship is our joyful 'Amen!' to and sharing in Jesus's own worship to God in the liberty and power of the Spirit. As the writer of Hebrews has it, Jesus is our Leitourgos, our worship leader (Heb 8.2), who takes the painful groans of our hearts and our fumbling words and our tormented efforts at prayer and praise and places them into his own mouth and offers them up to God in the freedom of the Spirit. Priesthood, in other words, has to do with the worship that God provides.

Priesthood is also about mission, about the mission of God which reaches all the way back into the life and election of Israel and, indeed, back into the decision of God to be God for us in the act of creation. Israel is neither a detour nor a mere prelude on the way to Jesus. Rather, Israel's very job description (which I take to be encapsulated in Exodus 19.6, "you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation", is grounded in God's own concern for the nations. Israel represents a people elected by God to be the light to the world, the city on the hill, the salt of the earth, descriptions which are then applied to the church and which immediately recall that we are dealing here with the notion of holiness.

### **Holiness and the Overcoming of Space**

In a recent article on Jewish notions of prophet, priest and king, Jonathan Sacks, who is the chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth and a very fine public intellectual and theologian, describes the priest as "a tender of holy spaces and holy times". He argues that where priests and priestly communities begin to engage in this work of tending is by distinguishing between the holy and the secular, and distinguishing between that which has been set apart by God for some specific purpose and that which is "common" or "ordinary". And he acknowledges that these are difficult concepts to define because they "belong to areas of existence that stand outside our normal categories for engaging with the world".<sup>3</sup>

But as difficult as these concepts are to define, the task of the priest or of the priestly community is to "keep the divine Presence" in the community's heart.<sup>4</sup> In a community that has forgotten that God is here living in our midst and caring deeply about all creation, the vocation of a priestly people is to help foster something like a public memory. It is this fostering of public memory, Sacks argues, that undergirds the logic for the daily service of the tabernacle and for the keeping of Shabbat (Sabbath), which is what Max Weber refers to as the "routinization of charisma".<sup>5</sup> Sacks believes that holiness represents those points in space and time where God becomes vivid, where God becomes tangible, where God becomes an existential Presence. Holiness, he says:

*"...is a break in the self-sufficiency of the material world, where infinity enters space and eternity enters time . . . The universe is the space God makes for [human beings]. The holy is the space [human beings] make for God . . . The holy is the emptiness in time and space vacated by humans so that it can be filled by the infinite presence of God . . . We make space for God in the same way that God makes space for us, by tzimtzum, self-effacement, self-renunciation."<sup>6</sup>*

Sacks's fidelity here to how holiness is understood in the Book of Leviticus, for example, or indeed in the Pentateuch generally, is, to my mind, beyond reasonable doubt. But this is not an

understanding of holiness with which Christians ought be satisfied. For Christians will want to press this two-fold movement in the most radical of directions by claiming that God's making of space for creation, and creation's making of space for God happens in a particular life called Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>7</sup> And so while for many religious people priesthood is about marking out and then maintaining certain boundaries of preconceived notions of holiness, for Christians, holiness is radically redefined by a particular life that assumes shape in our world.

Viewing holiness through the lens of the incarnation, the first thing we might observe is that Jesus's life, and particularly his resurrection, announces to us that there is no place in creation where Christ is not Lord. The idea that there are "God spaces" and/or "no God" spaces represents a fundamental category mistake as far as Christian theology is concerned. And here we might think, for example, about the narrative in Mark 5 where immediately after freeing a demon-possessed man and causing around two thousand pigs to commit suicide, Jesus is accosted by the synagogue leader Jairus who is the father of a dying girl. On his way to see this girl, Jesus is almost crushed by a large crowd, including a woman who has been menstruating for twelve years – in other words, according to the Levitical law (eg Lev 12), she is ceremonially unclean, and so is everyone and everything she touches. And that means that whoever comes into contact with her is excluded from the temple and its worship.

This is the man who deliberately touched unclean lepers and corpses. This is the man who made a point of eating with prostitutes and calling sinners his friends. This is the man who deliberately went out of his way to do almost everything that the Old Testament prohibits us – and especially priests – from doing. But would he allow this woman to touch him, to pollute him, to make him ceremonially unclean? Because that's precisely what she does when she touches him. And in that action, Jesus restores this woman to her family, to her community, and to God. And the same thing happens again when Jesus finally gets to Jairus's house and takes Jairus's dead daughter by the hand – something that Leviticus 21.11 makes pretty clear that priests shouldn't be doing: "The priest . . . shall not go where there is a dead body." What is this priest of God doing touching a dead girl? He is restoring her to her community, and he is thereby reminding Israel that priestly ministry is both radically restorative and radically risky.

### **Jesus's Priestly Community**

Of course, to think about mission and the priesthood of Christ is not only to think about Jesus. It is also to think about that community which shares in Jesus's priestly ministry in the world and which is learning to embrace its unique vocation to bear witness to the shape that the divine life assumes in a world in which death can have no future. This means, among other things, that a community which spends "prime time on concerns for which it has no unique competence" has failed to understand its unique vocation in the world, a vocation which "no other agency in the world has been commissioned to accomplish".<sup>8</sup>

It also recalls that God is not sitting around waiting for the church to get its act together, to enlarge the family business and extend its share in the marketplace. Rather, in "God's liberating invasion of the cosmos"<sup>9</sup> in Jesus, God is inviting the priestly community to participate in God's own movement toward the world, summoning all creation into the life of God's reign. Is this not, for example, precisely what is happening in the next chapter of Mark's Gospel, in chapter 6, where Jesus takes some fatigued and pretty-clueless disciples who have just come back from their mission trip – a trip, by the way, that involved neither fundraising nor the construction of any buildings – and places them in the very current of his own ministry of feeding the hungry. Not only is this action a result of Jesus's response to a concern raised by the disciples themselves but the multiplication of loaves and fish is not something that he chooses to do alone. In prayerfully lifting the food to heaven, he acknowledges his dependence upon God, an act that echoes his desire to do only what he sees God doing (John 5.9; cf. Mark 6.41).

In other words, Jesus himself is concerned to participate in the ministry of another. Also, Jesus says to the disciples, "You feed them" (Mark 6.37, NLT); he involves his disciples and they – albeit somewhat confused and probably somewhat begrudgingly – participate with him and so with God in feeding the hungry. I am not suggesting that Jesus needed the disciples, or even their fish and loaves, but that Jesus delights to find ways for his disciples to share in the creative compassion that God is exercising.

## Manifesting Life in the Midst of Death

The more I have reflected on the roles of Israel and the church as priestly communities, the more I have come to appreciate that the community's task is to manifest and bear witness to life in the midst of death. And this is not so odd, I guess, because one of the church's most profound claims is that "the first place to look for Christ is in hell".<sup>10</sup> To be concerned with life in the midst of death is to remember, as the theologian William Stringfellow reminds us, that "Christians are not distinguished by their political views, or moral decisions, or habitual conduct, or personal piety, or, least of all, by their churchly activities. Christians are distinguished by their radical esteem for the Incarnation... by their reverence for the life of God in the whole of creation, even and, in a sense, especially, creation in the travail of sin."<sup>11</sup>

Christians, in other words, are distinguished by their association with one who keeps odd company, who calls us to peculiarity, and who continually corrects our range of view regarding the world's true nature. And that is why, incidentally, all talk of "making the gospel relevant" to the world is absolutely obscene, for not only does it assume that we know more than we do, but it also assumes that God is a stranger among us".<sup>12</sup>

Jesus's peculiar and priestly community is called to be that community in the world which is constituted by and for a love so radically other-person-centered that it refuses to imagine life apart from blessing those who are opposed to it. It is a community that lives "in the midst of the traffic and turmoil and conflict of the world"<sup>13</sup> and that does so in such a way that it is entirely uninterested and uninvested in its own self-preservation. It is a community that throws itself entirely into the embarrassing service of Jesus and that does so not for God's sake but simply and solely for the sake of the world. It is a community that risks the refusal to engage in the politics of violence and in the economies of human indignity, that manifests God's orientation for every part of creation, and that ventures out "beyond the security of objective certainties, [and] worldly possessions, [and] finite aspirations and society's approval". It is a community that risks even its life with God so that it might "become contemporary with Christ".<sup>14</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from his Tegel Prison cell in 1944, reminded us that "the church is church only when it is there for others". And for Bonhoeffer this meant – just as a start – that the church:

*"... must give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the freewill offerings of the congregations and perhaps be engaged in some secular vocation [Beruf]. The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community – not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling [Beruf] what a life with Christ is, what it means 'to be there for others'. In particular, our church will have to confront the vices of hubris, the worship of power, envy, and illusionism as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, contentment."<sup>15</sup>*

Only when the church has the freedom itself to be poor among the poor will it know how to use the riches it has. Only as it journeys the infrequently trodden path away from the centres of imperial power and toward the embarrassing outskirts of Jerusalem and its public scorn will the church be given the kind of freedom to be truly missional and priestly. The priestly community created around Jesus is called to lose faith in present arrangements, to be entirely undaunted by "what the world calls possible" and to trust instead in the completely irresponsible impossibilities that "exist first on God's lips" and in God's imagination.<sup>16</sup>

The words that tell of the ministry of Christ are words of sorrow, poverty, rejection, radical unpopularity. They are words of agony.

It seems ridiculous to apply such words to the ministry of churches nowadays. Yet where these words cannot be truthfully applied to the ministry of the churches today they must then be spoken against the churches to show how far the churches are from being the Body of Christ engaged in the ministry of Christ in the world.<sup>17</sup>

It strikes me that the fidelity of the church's participation in the priestly ministry of Christ also requires that she "take pains to disown publicly the patterns of colonialism"<sup>18</sup> and of Constantinianism that have radically undermined her claim regarding Jesus's lordship over all of life. I also believe that the fidelity of the church's participation in the liveliness of God in the midst of death requires that she be a community who is herself continually put to death by the living word of Christ in Holy Scripture. Scripture, as one theologian put it:

*"...builds the church up by breaking the church open, and therefore in large measure by breaking the church down... Scripture is as much a de-stabilising feature of the life of the church as it is a factor in its cohesion and continuity... Through Scripture the church is constantly exposed to interruption. Being the hearing church is... the church's readiness 'that its whole life should be assailed, convulsed, revolutionised and reshaped'."*<sup>19</sup>

History suggests that such exposure to interruption normally happens via listening and wrestling (like Jacob), and questioning, and keeping open the expectation of the transformation of our vision and of our practices, whether we are talking about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's or about the full participation of gay and lesbian persons in the life of the community we sometimes fall into the trap of calling "ours".

## By Way of Conclusion

The church is a priestly community or it is not the church at all. And it is a priestly community because it is, by virtue of God's gracious election, called and gathered and empowered by God to, "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2.9, NRSV). This text recalls not only our Great High Priest's own journey from the darkness of Holy Saturday into the light of his ascension, but it also suggests that the journey from darkness into God's light is the very movement in which the community discovers that it is in fact God's community and that before it was even aware of this fact it had been gathered up into the dynamic stream of God's being for the world. In this movement alone is the Christian community liberated from the idolatrous efforts of self-preservation and self-propagation. In this movement alone is the community brought into what St. Paul called the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom 8.21), a freedom made certain only in one who as the high priest of creation leads God's people, and indeed all creation with them, into the worshipping, healing and participatory life of God.

1 This paper was originally presented to the elders of the Southern Presbytery, Invercargill, New Zealand, August 17, 2012.

2 James B. Torrance, 'The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship', in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T&T Clark/Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 348–69.

3 Jonathan Sacks, 'Kehunah and Kedushah: The Priestly Role', Office of the Chief Rabbi, <http://www.chief Rabbi.org/2012/07/11/kehunah-and-kedushah-the-priestly-role/>.

4 Ibid.

5 Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 363–85.

6 Sacks, 'Kehunah and Kedushah'. Italics in original.

7 See Jason A. Goroncy, 'The Elusiveness, Loss and Cruciality of Recovered Holiness: Some Biblical and Theological Observations', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 2 (2008): 195–209.

8 Carl E. Braaten, 'The Mission of the Gospel to the Nations', *Dialog* 30, no. 2 (1991): 125.

9 J. Louis Martyn, 'The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians', *Interpretation* 54, no. 3 (2000): 255.

10 William Stringfellow, 'No Priesthood: No Laity', in *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 165.

11 Ibid., 165.

12 William Stringfellow, 'Poverty, Piety, Charity and Mission', *Christian Century*, May 10, 1961, 585.

13 William Stringfellow, *A Private and Public Faith* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 19.

14 Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 180.

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Christian Gremmels, et al., trans. Isabel Best, et al., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 503. Italics in original.

16 Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 269. See Stringfellow, *Private and Public Faith*, 80–81; William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 101.

17 William Stringfellow, 'The Freedom of the Christian Life', in *William Stringfellow in Anglo-American Perspective*, ed. Anthony Dancer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 41.

18 Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 12.

19 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 46–47. Webster here cites from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thompson and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 804.