

# Mission and the Priesthood of Christ

*An address to the elders of the Southern Presbytery,  
Windsor Community Church, Invercargill, 17 August 2012*

One does not have to hang around the church very long to hear some weird stuff. For example, when I converted to Protestantism some quarter of a century ago, 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 went 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 kind of subcontractors to the big boss upstairs. And the foreman Jesus trusted this community to carry on his work while he was away and he said that he’ll turn up again when the job was nearly done just to check that it had all been done according to instructions. And what this means, I often hear, 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, whereas God had once been personally invested in this little project called ‘creation’, God had now essentially taken a back seat to the whole program. God is now a bit like a founding director of a company 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 – bear no practical difference to how we think and go about being a faithful community. This represents a profound problem. Moreover, and more particularly for our purposes tonight, it is rarely made explicit why there are human beings at all. And what does God really expect from us that God does not, perhaps, expect from a kangaroo, or from a pine tree, or from a cancer cell?

About 25 years ago, I came across a remarkable essay on the place of Jesus Christ in worship.<sup>1</sup> It was written by the Scottish theologian James Torrance. In that essay, Torrance suggested that God had made creation to be something like an orchestra for God's glory, and that human beings were created to be the conductor of 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 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 was nothing short of an epiphany for me. I had been in the church for my entire life but I never realised that grace penetrates so deeply into our broken humanity; that God has assumed our humanity in all its fallenness and has refused to be fallen in it; and that Jesus' 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 the creation itself in fitting worship which transforms the human condition from the inside out.<sup>2</sup>

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, something that could lead only to despair. It means that our life and worship is preceded by an act that makes our life and worship

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> At the centre of this epiphany was a shift from prioritising the 'What' and 'How' and 'Why' questions that modernity is so obsessed with a 'Who' question. Here see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (trans. Edwin Hanton Robertson; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 27–38.

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. Far from it. Rather, it means that our worship is our joyful 'Amen' to and sharing in Jesus' 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. So priesthood has to do with the worship that God provides.

The language of priesthood is also about mission. And it recalls that God's mission reaches all the way back into the life and election of Israel, and indeed, into the decision of God to be God for us in the act of creation.<sup>3</sup> 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 those 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'.<sup>4</sup> He argues that where priests and priestly communities begin to engage in this work of tendering is by distinguishing between the holy and the secular, 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'.

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<sup>3</sup> See Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006); William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Baker/Paternoster Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Kehunah and Kedushah: The Priestly Role* [2012]; Online: <http://www.chief Rabbi.org/2012/07/11/kehunah-and-kedushah-the-priestly-role/>. This and the following citations from Sacks are taken from this article.

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. 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), 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.

Sacks' 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 all happens in a particular life called Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>6</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 re-defined by a particular life that assumes shape in our world. In other words, it is for us the incarnation which defines holiness.

So what does holiness look like when viewed through the lens of the incarnation? The first thing we might say is that Jesus' 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 is fundamentally inappropriate as far as Christian theology is

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

concerned. And here we might think, for example, about the narrative in Mark chapter 5 where immediately after freeing a demon-possessed man and causing around 2,000 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, one of the constituents of which is a woman who has been menstruating for 12 years. In other words, according to the levitical law (e.g., 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 woman dashes onto the NT stage for 10 verses. She's got no name. She's got no idea of who Jesus really is. He represents for her the last straw in a long line of doctors and miracle workers that she has spent all of her money on and over a decade seeing. She has been treated like a leper in her community for 12 years. For 12 years, she has been tormented by guilt and anxiety. For 12 years, she has been untouched ... and untouchable. She has been unable to hug her kids. She has been unable to pour a drink for a friend. No one has invited her to their home in 12 years. Now she doesn't want to *know* Jesus. She's not seeking a relationship with him, but she wants to be healed. She wants to be restored to her community. She wants to be able to go to her kids' birthday party and to make love with her husband. She wants to be able to prepare a meal for her family and enjoy a day out with her friends. And she hears reports of this guy in town who heals people and so, at the absolute end of her tether, she goes along to check it out, and she moves in on Jesus from behind ... anonymously in a crowd.

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 OT 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' house and takes Jairus' 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'. So

what is this priest of God doing touching a dead girl? I want to suggest that he is restoring her to her community, and by so doing he is reminding Israel that priestly ministry is both radically restorative and radically risky.

### **Jesus' 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' priestly ministry in the world,<sup>7</sup> 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 towards 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, which involved neither fundraising nor 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' 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 which echoes his desire to *do* only what he *sees* God doing (Jn 5.9). In other words, Jesus himself is concerned to participate in the ministry of another. Also, Jesus says to the disciples, 'You feed them'. In other words, he involves his disciples, and they – albeit somewhat confused and probably somewhat begrudgingly – participate with him and so with God in feeding the hungry. Now I am not suggesting here that Jesus

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<sup>7</sup> Exod 19.6; 1 Pet 2.9; cf. Rom 15.16. Here I have in mind a participation in and dependence upon a word and action that precedes us, a word which interrupts our own incurvature and which has the capacity to truly humanise our thoughts and acts after the image of Christ.

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

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

needed the disciples – or even their fish and loaves. Rather, I am suggesting that Jesus delights to find ways for his disciples to share in the creative compassion that God is exercising.

So, the priesthood of Christ is about worship, and it's about healing, and it's about participation. And I want to suggest, tonight, that there is a sense in which each of these actions are actually all about the same thing, and that is about manifesting life in the midst of death.

### **Manifesting life in the midst of death**

The more I have reflected on the role of Israel and on that of the church as a priestly community, the more I understand the community's task as one of manifesting and bearing 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>

So what is Jesus' peculiar and priestly community called to look like? I suggest that it is called to be that community in the world which is constituted by and for a love so radically

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

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>12</sup> William Stringfellow, 'Poverty, Piety, Charity and Mission', *Christian Century* (10 May 1961), 585.

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

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously put it from his Tegel Prison cell in 1944, ‘the church is the church only when it exists for others’. And for Bonhoeffer this meant – just as a start – that the church

should give away all its property to those in need ... The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary life, not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell [people] of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. In particular, our own church will have to take the field against the view of *hubris*, power-worship, envy and humbug, as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak in moderation, purity, trust, loyalty, constancy, patience, humility, contentment, and modesty.<sup>15</sup>

It seems to me that 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 towards the embarrassing outskirts of Jerusalem and its public scorn will it be given the kind of freedom to be truly missional and priestly.<sup>16</sup> The priestly community created around Jesus is called to lose faith in present

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<sup>13</sup> William Stringfellow, *A Private and Public Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 19.

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

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. Eberhard Bethge, et al.; trans. Isabel Best, et al.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works; vol. 8; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>16</sup> See Stringfellow, *Private and Public Faith* 80–81. Also William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 101: ‘The biblical witness is *always* a witness of resistance to the *status quo* in politics, economics, and all society. It is a witness of resurrection from death. Paradoxically, those who embark on the biblical witness constantly



arrangements, to be entirely undaunted by 'what the world calls possible', and to trust instead in the completely irresponsible impossibilities which 'exist first on God's lips' and in God's imagination.<sup>17</sup> In other words, to quote Stringfellow again:

The ministry of Christ is a ministry of great extravagance – of a reckless, scandalous expenditure of His life for the sake of the world's life. Christ gives away His life. The world finds new life in His life and in His gift of His life to the world. His is not a very prudential life, not a very conservative life, not a very cautious life, not – by ordinary standards – a very successful life ...

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>18</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>19</sup> and of Constantinianism which have radically undermined her claim regarding Jesus' 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

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risk death – through execution, exile, imprisonment, persecution, defamation, or harassment – at the behest of the rulers of this age. Yet those who do not resist the rulers of the present darkness are consigned to a moral death, the death of their humanness. That, of all the ways of dying, is the most ignominious'.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 269.

<sup>18</sup> William Stringfellow, 'The Freedom of the Christian Life' in *William Stringfellow in Anglo-American Perspective* (ed. Anthony Dancer; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 41.

<sup>19</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 12.

interruption. Being the hearing church is ... the church's readiness 'that its whole life should be assailed, convulsed, revolutionised and reshaped'.<sup>20</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**

I have suggested that 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, in the words of 1 Peter, 'proclaim the mighty acts of One who called you out of darkness into marvellous light' (1 Pet 2.9). 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 the fact it has 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.

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*Feast Day of Maximilian Kolbe, 2012*

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<sup>20</sup> 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.