

HOBART LECTURE

**Stepping beyond – entering into mission:
The Pastoral Care of the People of God,**

by

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In his encounter with the Syrophenecian woman in Mark 7 and Matthew 15, Jesus—shaped and formed by a tribal identity, part of a people defined as “Jewish” – finds himself nevertheless drawn beyond that identity. Perhaps, like most of us, he experiences the anxiety that comes in such a moment. Such encounters can feel like an utter loss of identity, as if beyond our tribe – beyond its grammar of language, culture, and relationship, there is no identity for us. We live in a world haunted by such dynamics, and by the danger they pose as cultures overlap and suspicions multiply. From the war on terror to the furor over a consecration in New Hampshire, our times are shot through with the unavoidable reality of the other, and with the fear that other evokes.

What prepared Jesus for this moment? How was he able to step beyond the gates and fences of his formation into a new identity in which “us” could include this foreigner? What is the identity that cuts across the customary boundaries within which we know who we are? What makes it safe “out there”?

For Jesus, I would venture, it is his relationship with the Father in the communion of the Spirit. With the Father, in the communion of the Spirit, there is no “out there” to be

feared over against the cultural safety of “in here”. God does not inhabit – as all cultures must – a place that must be defended against the real or perceived threat of the other, the not-us, the out-there.

In the encounter with the Syrophenecian woman, Jesus enters more fully into the undefended life of God. That he does so as a person through an encounter with another person might startle us, though on reflection it need not. How else can a person inhabiting history, shaped and formed by a culture and a tribe with all the possibilities and limits that such shaping suggests, be called out of the defended boundaries of that culture *except* by someone who stands outside it? What we see in this encounter is Jesus inhabiting more deeply the undefended spaciousness in which he already dwells as the second person of the Trinity.

Our understanding of Jesus as a full participant both in human history *and* in the life of the Trinity means that his life is somehow both subject to history and established from beyond it. He is both the *logos* of the prologue to the Fourth Gospel and the rabbi whose life takes the shape of that *logos* by means of the processes of history. As he chooses, he chooses what in one sense already is, yet at the same time cannot until he enters it by his choosing.

By the time of his arrest and trial, his human life has almost completely taken its Godly shape. In his passion and death, he discloses that shape as cruciform, and we come face to face with God’s costly determination to remain undefended. On the cross he embodies

a life that does not express itself in defending boundaries, but in ever-widening circles of communion. Jesus' unwillingness to defend a set of boundaries is an act of self-definition on God's part. Defeated in the terms of fallen history, God remains God in the terms of eternity.

Gates and fences: abandoning the expansive mission of God

The church, of course, has been all too willing to imprison God within a culture – a set of gates and fences – within which we believe we can save God. Our temptation to save God (by which we mean to defend our version of God's truth) is understandable, but its consequences have been catastrophic for our witness. We bear faulty witness to expansive communion by re-drawing the boundaries of holiness in terms that we can understand and defend. And we carve out this or that dimension of the human creation and call it “the people of God”, a people – and their culture – to be defended at whatever cost against the pervasive and immediate threats of “the people not of God.” We call ourselves disciples – followers of Jesus, when in fact we act counter to his own example, defending what we take to be his truth from the very tax collectors and sinners whose communion he sought, exchanging his commodious presence for the confinement of our certainties.

In our 2000 meeting in Portugal, the Primates of the Anglican Communion and Moderators of the United Churches asserted that “when we turn away from one another, we turn away from the cross of Jesus.” I would suggest that in so turning, we turn away from his mission as well, and therefore from our own, and become salt without savour.

Moreover, our communion as Anglicans is not complete; Jesus' life and ministry, including his death and resurrection, suggest that God's project is not to bring all Anglicans, or even all Christians, but all *people* into the communion of joy in God's presence: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12.32) The pastoral care of the people of God is the care of God for the whole human project and all its participants; though we may fall short of that vision for want of capacity, when we are no longer drawn by it, we are abandoning our vocation.

Changing models of Pastoral Care

The models that have served the pastoral care of the people of God in the past have always had some relationship to the mission of that people. The learned pastor of the nineteenth and early twentieth century served a stable community in response to its routine grief and gladness. A version of the Christian narrative played an obvious and foundational role in the lives of civil communities, and the pastor was the visible representative and spokesman for that narrative.

In some parts of Canada and the United States – in some places in Atlantic Canada and the American south and Midwest, for example – that pastoral role persists, and continues to find embodiment primarily in the work and life of the ordained. Church membership in such places is, if not growing, at least shrinking less slowly than elsewhere as a proportion of the population. It is worth noting that these are places in which, for the most part, patterns of migration and the interaction of cultures have not yet brought persons and communities face to face with the pervasive and insistent presence of the

Other. They tend to be places in which, for example, African-American or First Nations persons are either absent or rendered invisible in the lives of those who make up the dominant culture.

But in other places, models of pastoral care have been through an additional cycle between the “routine grief and gladness” of several generations ago and the circumstances in which we now find ourselves. In the period between the end of the Second World War and today, we have passed, relatively quickly, but not without consequences, through a period in which a therapeutic model of pastoral care was dominant. As in the earlier period, ordained leaders played the most visible role in this model. But, as John Snow notes in *The Impossible Vocation: Ministry in the Mean Time*, this model emerged in the face of significant human dislocation, especially in light of the mobility required of so many North American workers, following work from Newfoundland to Ontario, from Saskatchewan to Alberta, from the rural American south to the urban north, from everywhere, it would seem, to California.

The life of the community during this period was primarily self-regarding and its goals were essentially adaptive. Community as a thing in itself became an answer to the alienation that attended the rapid urbanization and unprecedented mobility of the post-war period. Churches sprang up as beacons around which people could find each other and share a common task. In retrospect, an enormous amount of the energy and commitment that was directed towards the establishing of mainline churches in suburbia might be traced as much to nostalgia for an earlier settled familiarity as to any clear

theological or missiological conviction. It is worth noting that another movement grew rapidly in that environment – service clubs like Rotary International, Optimists, and Lions – and that their state in the ebb-tide of modernity is considerably worse than our own. Notable, also, in this period, are the words of Dwight Eisenhower in at the beginning of his presidency: “Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.” Such words, anodyne in that era, simply are not possible to utter without flinching in our own. What historians of religion called the “faith in faith” of the religious revival of the 1950’s makes no sense at all in a world of competing and vicious fundamentalisms.

Re-founding pastoral care in mission

In our time, the object and content of faith is absolutely at the heart of mission, and for Christian people, that object and content is the life of the Trinity, especially as revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ and continued in the life of his Body, the church. Conservatives are right – it is no longer good enough to help people simply to adapt to the dynamic of this world. But they are wrong if they see the faithful Christian response to that dynamic as essentially only defensive, drawing lines in the sand across which the surrounding culture may not encroach, rather than challenging the assumptions, principles and practices of that culture out of the deep and undefended wells of God’s love.

Because the church is “a people” shaped by a culture that calls us not to its defense, but to its expression through our witness in the life of the world, and because that witness takes place in the context of a world in which hostility among cultures, combined with

their immediate proximity to one another, brings both real and imagined dangers, we carry both a weighty responsibility and a profound vulnerability in our common life.

The weight of that responsibility calls to mind the encounter between Moses and the Lord as recorded in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Numbers:

So Moses said to the Lord, ‘Why have you treated your servant so badly?

Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child”, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?

Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, “Give us meat to eat!” I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too weighty for me.” (Numbers 11.11-14)

The pattern of our past has endowed us with an understanding of pastoral care in which the weight of caring for “all this people” has fallen disproportionately on the ordained. But the weight – I am told that the Hebrew word can as easily be translated “glory” – of this people is too much. Moreover, the earliest models of “lay ministry” often misunderstood the missional requirement of the church, and framed “lay ministry” in terms of providing support to the clergy as they carried burden of the internal pastoral care of the church – that is, of how the church cares for its own members.

What is called for is not a simple change in ecclesiology that endows some lay people with some of the responsibilities of clergy within the lives of congregations, but a simultaneous renewal both of ecclesiology and of missiology.

The Baptismal Covenant – Pastoral care for a church in mission

The Baptismal Covenant, and the liturgy within which it is lodged, provide a basis for reflecting on the shape of such a renewal. I am convinced that significant resources of imagination, will, and energy will be demanded of us if the pastoral care of the people of God is to take a renewed and vital shape in response to the deep risk and hunger that haunt our world. The Baptismal Covenant calls for a community of witness, gathering to learn, to pray, to share the hospitality of the Lord's table. It calls for clear thinking and self-knowledge in response to sin – our own as well as that of others. It calls us to membership in a people that bears witness to God's story and God's way, made known in Jesus. It calls for the discernment of Christ in all persons, as St. Benedict charged his monks to remind themselves every time they opened the door to a stranger. And it would lead us to ways of peace, justice, and the dignity of every person. The drama within which this covenant is set is nothing less than the re-founding of our lives. This is the drama, not of a sect or a cult, but of a people. That it is itself held within a liturgy of undefended love and the cost of that love, reminds us that this people does not lay claim to or defend a space of its own, but lives by the truth that the world is a single household to be made fit and hospitable for all God's children.

In response to the complaint of Moses, God commands him to bring seventy elders to the tent of meeting. (Numbers 11.16-17): “I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.” Three decades ago, we might have thought of this in terms of commissioning teachers, communion ministers and pastoral visitors to care for the internal pastoral life of the church. Now, I believe, we are being invited by the same text not just to include a select group of members to take part in the work of caring for the church, but to invite all the baptized into the work of caring for the world and to equip them for that work. Mission, ministry, the pastoral care of the people of God – this is the work of the household of the baptized.

Though the Baptismal Covenant and its liturgical setting make this vocation clear (and parenthetically, may I observe that one very positive development is the movement of baptism from the private Sunday afternoon to the public Sunday morning), in many if not most cases our understanding and practice have not caught up with that mandate. The roots of this dissonance between call and performance run in many directions, but I wonder if the most significant among them might be traced to our failure to resolve the relationship between the ordered ministry of deacons, priests and bishops on one hand, and the ministry of the household of the baptized on the other.

Sharpening Focus – Ordained ministry and the household of the baptized

I was ordained in the last days of what the next generation would call clericalism. The church gave us status and vesture. The world gave us parking privileges and half-price admission to the movies. But even then, it was apparent to the observant that the world had changed, and that the authority associated with the role of the ordained leader – and nature of that authority – was already under pressure.

I served as a priest in the time in which the ministry of the laity was coming into sharper focus in the life of the church. In the early days, it seems to me, there was considerable emphasis – especially as the rhetoric of lay ministry often became separated from catholic theology – on restructuring power relationships *within* the church. There were more than a few places and times in which the relationship between clergy and laity was framed in terms of a zero-sum power game – that is, in terms of removing power from the ordained in order to impart power to the laity. As a reaction against some of the authoritarian excesses of clericalism, this was an understandable response, but as a long-term ecclesiology, it is so deeply flawed as to be unworkable.

On the other hand, there is no way back – and for the most part no desire for such a way – to the patterns of clericalism. In part because of the fact that some who were endowed with its power abused that power, in part because it denied the gifts of so many laity, but most compellingly because it simply does not meet the challenges of pastoral mission in this century, we find ourselves invited to find a way forward. I am concerned, however, that if we do not find a way forward, we will be tempted to equate “strong leadership”

with the patterns of an earlier age, and frustrate ourselves as we try to force those patterns into a mission setting in which they cannot function effectively.

A renewed partnership for mission: Ordained and baptismal ministries

To that end, let me sketch the briefest of outlines for a renewed partnership between the community of the baptized and those who serve that community as deacons, priests and bishops. I begin by noting that the ministry of that *community* is, in its fullness, diaconal – it serves; it is priestly – it offers itself; it is episcopal – it finds its life in hospitable communion. Those three dimensions of its life are dominical, grounded in the life of one who takes up basin and towel, who offers himself in his passion and death, and who interprets his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners as a sign of God’s reign. Episcopal, priestly and diaconal ministries are not separate from the ministry of the baptized; they are its length and breadth and depth – its dimensions.

Our orders refract the ministry of Jesus – his servanthood is the servanthood to which all the baptized are called, refracted through, but never exclusively possessed by, those who serve in the order of deacons. His self-giving is the self-giving to which all the baptized are called, refracted through, but never exclusively possessed by, those who serve in the order of presbyters. And the hospitality of his table fellowship is the hospitality to which all the baptized are called, refracted through, but never exclusively possessed by, those who serve in the order of bishops.

At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the presider invites the household to the table, saying, “The gifts of God for the people of God.” Our challenge is to understand, as a community of the baptized, and as ordained persons serving that community, that we are not simply the consumers of those gifts, but their stewards. The pastoral care of the people of God is not completed when bishop, priest, deacon or communion minister places the Body of Christ in the hands of a Christian, but when that Christian, carries that Body of Christ into the world in acts of servanthood, self-giving, and hospitality.

I do not know *how* that will happen. I suspect it will happen in a rich diversity of ways, as the baptized and the clergy who serve them in their care for the world find resources, imagination, and will to carry out this ministry locally, and join ranks to support it globally. But what a different world it would be if we could capture the imagination of the household of Christian faith, if in the morning, it awoke to ask how it might order its life to care for the world, and as night fell, entrusted the work of that day – its achievements and its failures – to the mercy and love of the God who sent it forth at dawn.