

HOBART LECTURE
by
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I want to begin this lecture by quoting from a novel. One of my former fellow bishops always maintained that many novels contained good theology and there were two advantages in reading them as opposed to pure works of theology. They were much more enjoyable and they were usually easier to understand. Don't take that to mean that I am advocating that you abandon theological tomes!

In Pat Barker's novel 'Regeneration' – the first novel in her trilogy on the First World War, she relates a conversation between two poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen at Craiglockhart – a Scottish mental hospital requisitioned by the War Office to offer treatment for those who had been to the front and who needed rehabilitation in one way or another. Sassoon, who had come to believe that the war, which had begun as a war of defence and liberation, had become a war of aggression and conquest, and had said so publicly, had been sent there as an act of kindness by his superior, rather than being court martialed for treason. Owen was there because he was suffering from shell shock. Sassoon was a published poet and Owen, who had just begun to write poetry, strikes up a friendship with him.

They talk about Christianity and Sassoon says about the war front. "All those Calvaries at crossroads just sitting there waiting to be turned into symbols. I knew a man once, Potter his name was. You know the miraculous crucifix stories? 'Shells falling all around, but the figure of Our Lord was spared'? Well, Potter was so infuriated by them he decided to start a one-man campaign. Whenever he saw an undamaged crucifix, he used it for target practice. You could hear him for miles. 'ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, bastard on the Cross, FIRE!' There weren't many miraculous crucifixes in Potter's section of the front. He hesitated. 'But perhaps I shouldn't be saying this? I mean for I know, you're – Owen says – 'I don't know what I am. But I do know I wouldn't want a f-faith that couldn't face the facts. If I were going to call myself a Christian, I'd have to call myself a pacifist as well. I don't think it's possible to c-call yourself a C-Christian and and j-just leave out the awkward bits'.

'You'll never make a bishop'

'No, well, I think I can live with that'.

Those two sentences of Owen's speak volumes – and I don't mean the one about bishops!

‘I don’t think it’s possible to call yourself a Christian and just leave out the awkward bits’. ‘I wouldn’t want a faith that couldn’t face the facts’.

Well, some people do. They somehow gloss over the tragic and hard bits, either in their own lives or in the life of the world around them, or pretend that there are no problems in believing in God, or wonder where he is when tragedy sweeps our world. Potter’s reaction of taking shots at undamaged crucifixes shocks them more than believing in a God who protects crucifixes from damage but who does nothing to stop the slaughter of human beings. And all of this, of course, is of direct relevance to us as ministers of the Gospel. How do you present the Gospel in an imaginative and meaningful way without avoiding the difficulties that belief entails?

Clergy exist among other things to help people face the facts about the problems of believing in God and of praying to Him, and in facing the facts about the kind of world and church we live in. And for that to happen, we also need good insights into our own character.

Let me then try to say something about each of these things.

First, the need to have intellectual and spiritual integrity in matters of faith. R S Thomas, the Welsh priest poet, puts it like this:

‘And in the book I read
“God is Love”. But lifting
my head, I do not find it so.’

Or again

“Not as in the old days I pray,
God. My life is not what it was.
Yours, too, accepts the presence of
the machine?”

Bonhoeffer asked, during the dark days of Nazism when, in his words, the “Claims of the Christian faith had been reduced to rubble”, how to make sense of the reality of God. He wrote “It is only by completely living in this world that one learns to have faith – living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes, failures, experiences and perplexities”. In other words, we have to face up to the world as it is not as we would like it to be and this is especially true of our pastoral ministry. I will use bereavement as an example because it is an experience all clergy encounter. Religious people sometimes feel guilty that they are grieving, for have not the deceased gone to a better place. Christian relatives sometimes feel that to grieve is to show faithlessness and of course this is sometimes reinforced by parts of the Christian tradition.

Here is Charles Wesley:

“Away with our sorrow and fear
we soon shall recover our home”.

And,
“Rejoice for a brother deceased
our loss is his infinite gain;
A soul out of prison released,
and freed from its bodily chain”.

Or St. Bernard of Cluny,
“Brief life is here our portion,
Brief sorrow, short-lived care:
The life that knows no ending,
The tearless life is there.
O happy retribution:
Short toil, eternal rest;
For mortals and for sinners
A mansion with the blest!
O home of fadeless splendour,
Of flowers that bear no thorn,
Where they shall dwell as children
Who here as exiles mourn”.

Or as John Mason Neale puts it,
“We by enemies distrest,
They in Paradise at rest;
We the captives, they the free”.

Or John Ellerton:
“Father, in thy gracious keeping
Leave we now thy servant sleeping”.

People’s hearts may be breaking and yet they may feel that if they believe in God, they ought to be, if not rejoicing, at least content to release their loved ones into the hands of God and because they cannot, their grief is intensified still further. Henry Scott-Holland’s words in this context are no help at all:

“Death is nothing at all.
I have only slipped into the next room
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow”.

The fact is that though we may believe that death is not the end of everything, it is the end of life as we know it. We shall not see our loved ones on earth again and we may need to give people reassurance that it is alright, both as a human being and as a Christian, to grieve. Christian faith does not make people immune from the symptoms of bereavement.

Bonhoeffer, in his Letters and Papers from Prison had this to say about bereavement, “Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try and find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God doesn’t fill it, but on the contrary, keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain”.

Faith does not take away grief, pain and loss. Grief and mourning have to be accepted and valued. Holy Scripture seems to be on our side here. David laments Jonathan and then Abner. Jesus weeps for Lazarus and mourners are recognised by Jesus in the Beatitudes because their grief experiences make them amenable to an understanding of and hope for God’s Kingdom. St Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, urges people to “weep with those who weep” Roman 12.15.

Recent studies indicate that the church is not terribly good at doing this. Kubler Ross, in her book on “Death and Dying” has this to say,

“What amazed me, was the number of clergy who felt quite comfortable using a Prayer Book or a chapter out of the Bible as the sole communication between them and the bereaved, thus avoiding listening to their needs and being exposed to questions they might be unable or unwilling to answer”.

The Harvard Study of Bereaved People of 1974 found that in sermons at funerals, the clergy tended to minimise the loss of the deceased by emphasising what full lives they led and stressing how their spirits lived on.

Belief in an after life can offer comfort but it does not eliminate the grieving process. The two things can go together.

One question which often arises in bereavement is the question, “why me?” in an attempt to make sense of the tragedy that has happened. Some people assume that God is punishing them for some wrong doing. In his book “Bad Things Happen to Good People”, Harold Kushner tells this story:

“I was a young rabbi just starting out in my profession, when I was called on to try to help a family through an unexpected and almost unbearable tragedy. This middle-aged couple had one daughter, a bright nineteen-year-old who was in her freshman year at an out-of-state college. One morning at breakfast, they received a phone call from the university infirmary. “We have some bad news for you. Your daughter collapsed while walking to class this morning. It seems a blood vessel burst in her brain. She died before we could do anything for her. We’re terribly sorry”.

Stunned, the parents asked a neighbour to come to help them decide what steps to take next. The neighbour notified the synagogue, and I went over to see them that same day. I entered their home, feeling very inadequate, not knowing any words that could ease their pain. I anticipated anger, shock, grief, but I didn't expect to hear the first words they said to me. "You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur". Why did they say that? Why did they assume that they were somehow responsible for this tragedy? Who taught them to believe in a God who would strike down an attractive, gifted young woman without warning as punishment for someone else's ritual infraction?"

Kushner also tells a personal story:

"Our son Aaron had just passed his third birthday when our daughter Ariel was born. Aaron was a bright and happy child, who before the age of two, could identify a dozen different varieties of dinosaur and could patiently explain to an adult that dinosaurs were extinct. My wife and I had been concerned about his health from the time he stopped gaining weight at the age of eight months, and from the time his hair started falling out after he turned one year old. Prominent doctors had seen him, had attached complicated names to his condition and had assured us that he would grow to be very short but would be normal in all other ways. Just before our daughter's birth, we moved from New York to a suburb of Boston where I became the rabbi of the local congregation. We discovered that the local paediatrician was doing research in problems of children's growth, and we introduced him to Aaron. Two months later – the day our daughter was born – he visited my wife in the hospital and told us that our son's condition was called progeria, "rapid aging". He went on to say that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while he was still a child, and would die in his early teens.

How does one handle news like that? I was a young inexperienced rabbi, not as familiar with the process of grief as I would later come to be, and what I mostly felt that day was a deep, aching sense of unfairness. It didn't make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families. I believed that I was following God's ways and doing His work. How could this be happening to my family? If God existed, if He was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?

And even if I could persuade myself that I deserved this punishment for some sin of neglect or pride that I was not aware of, on what grounds did Aaron have to suffer? He was an innocent child, a happy, outgoing three year old. Why should he have to suffer physical and psychological pain every day of his life? Why should he have to be stared at, pointed at, wherever he went? Why should he be condemned to grow into adolescence, see other boys and girls beginning to date, and realise that he would never know marriage or fatherhood? It simply didn't make sense.

Like most people, my wife and I had grown up with an image of God as an all-wise, all-powerful parent figure who would treat us as our earthly parents did, or even better. If we were obedient and deserving, He would reward us. If we got out of line, He would discipline us, reluctantly but

firmly. He would protect us from being hurt or from hurting ourselves, and would see to it that we got what we deserved in life.

Like most people, I was aware of the human tragedies that darkened the landscape – the young people who died in car crashes, the cheerful loving people wasted by crippling diseases, the neighbours and relatives whose retarded or mentally ill children people spoke of in hushed tones. But that awareness never drove me to wonder about God’s justice, or to question His fairness. I assumed that He knew more about the world than I did.

Then came the day in hospital when the doctor told us about Aaron and explained what progeria meant. It contradicted everything I had been taught. I could only repeat over and over again in my mind, “This can’t be happening. It is not how the world is supposed to work”. Tragedies like this were supposed to happen to selfish, dishonest people whom I, as a rabbi, would then try to comfort by assuring them of God’s forgiving love. How could it be happening to me, to my son, if what I believed about the world was true?”

So the question of death as punishment for sin is not an infrequent response to sudden or tragic death. As Kushner says, parents who had lost a 19 year old without warning were not profoundly religious, but when stunned by tragedy, they reverted back to the basic belief that God punishes people for their sins. They felt that the death had been their fault. Had they been less selfish and lazy about the Yom Kippur fast, she might still be alive. They were angry at God for having exacted his pound of flesh so strictly – but afraid to admit their anger for fear that He would then punish them again.

Now the idea that God gives people what they deserve and that our misdeeds cause our misfortune, is a neat and attractive solution to the problem of evil. There is a good deal of biblical evidence indeed for the idea, not least in the description of the ups and downs of the people of Israel in the Hebrew canon. But having said this, the biblical evidence as a whole is much more nuanced, epitomised by that short dialogue between Jesus and the disciples at John Chapter 9, “As he passed by he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind? Jesus answered, It was not that this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the work of God might be made manifest in him”

And biblical nuances apart, the idea does in any case have a number of serious limitations:

It teaches people to blame themselves

It creates guilt even where there is no basis for it

It makes people hate God and hate themselves

It does not fit the facts – how can we know?

Anyway some got off scot free in doing evil and other seemingly good people are punished.

All that such explanations do is to try and defend God – try and transform bad into good and pain into privilege. Harriet Schiff has a book called “The Bereaved Parent”. She remembers when

her young son died during an operation to correct a congenital heart malfunction, her clergyman took her aside and said:

“I know that this is a painful time for you. But I know that you will get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear. God only lets this happen to you because He knows that you are strong enough to handle it”.

Harriet Schiff remembers her reaction to those words:

“If only I was a weaker person, Robbie would still be alive”.

Anyway, it is not true is it? I have seen people crack up under the strain of unbearable tragedy. It is not true that people never have to endure more than they can bear.

A related theological problem, especially if the dead person was a child or if the person died under particularly tragic circumstances is why has God allowed this to happen. To many people God is all powerful. He can do what he likes, and change anything. Yet he is meant to be good and loving. As John Hick puts it:

“If God is perfectly good, he must want to abolish all evil, if he is unlimitedly powerful, he must be able to abolish all evil: but evil exists; therefore God is either not perfectly good or not unlimitedly powerful”.

Some try to resolve this by saying that it liberates us from a world of pain and leads us to a better place e.g. the death of a 5 year old in a traffic accident is seen as the taking away from a world of sin and pain to go to a happier land where there is no pain or grief and therefore perhaps is an occasion for rejoicing. Yet note how horrific it all is:

to lose a child without warning.

to rejoice in the death of a young person.

Yet people often say things such as ‘God has his reasons’ or ‘he only takes the best’.

But what kind of God is this God if that is the way he behaves? Studdert Kennedy asks the same question in one of his poems:

“And I hate the God of Power, on his hellish heavenly throne,
Looking down on rape and murder, hearing little children moan.
Tho’ a million angels hail thee King of Kings yet cannot I,
There is nought can break the silence of my sorrow save the cry,
Thou who rulest this world of sinners with thy heavy iron rod,
Was there ever any sinner who has sinned the sin of God?
Praise to God in heaven’s highest and in all the depths be praise,
Who in all His works is brutal, like a beast in all His ways!”.

People of faith, no more than anyone else, have all the answers. Perhaps all we can do is to respond rather than explain. Job gets no explanation. The response he gets (Job 38: 2-17) is that God's creation is as it is and we cannot hope to understand it because we are human beings and not God. The Christian can go one step further. The God revealed by Jesus is a God of love and compassion and he desires those things for us which are for our good. God is not a heartless judge or a puppeteer, or someone who can be manipulated by the pious pleas of his friends. Nor is he a partisan God who gives knighthoods to those who've given donations to the party, but the God of Jesus is the God who is always on the side of those who are suffering. Ultimately, there is no final answer – all we can say is that somehow we believe God is with us in our sorrow and grief. Thus Studdert Kennedy ends his poem in this way:

“God the God I love and worship reigns in sorrow on the Tree,
Broken, bleeding but unconquered, very God of God to me,
All that showy pomp of splendour, all that sheen of angels wings
Was but borrowed from the baubles that surround our earthly kings.
High and lifted up, I see Him on the eternal Calvary,
And two pierced hands are stretching cast and west o'er land and sea.
On my knees I fall and worship that great Cross that shines above,
For the very God of Heaven is not Power but power of love.”

The late John Taylor, a former bishop of Winchester, recalls the story of how he was once asked by a friend to visit a young couple whose 2 year old daughter had been found dead in her cot. They were, he says, still stunned and haunted by the question why? The bishop said, “I simply could not offer them the conventional reassurance about it all being in God's providence, a mystery now but one day to be seen as part of a loving plan. “I know”, he said, “that many good souls find lasting comfort from such counsel, but to me it has become unconvincing and strained and suggests a picture of God I find impossible to love, arrogant though that sounds. I said to them instead that their child's death was a tragic accident, an unforeseeable failure in that function of the little body, that so far from being willed or planned by God, it was, for Him, a disaster and a frustration of his will for life and fulfilment just as it was for them, and that He shared their pain and loss and was with them in it”.

He went on to say ”that God was not a potentate ordering this or that to happen, but that the world is full of chance and accident and God has let it be so because that is the only sort of world in which freedom, development, responsibility and love could come into being. Yet God was committed to this kind of world in love and to each person in it, and was with them in this tragedy, giving himself to them in fortitude and healing and faith to help them through and that their child was held in that same caring, suffering love”. In other words God cannot solve our problems for us, but he is with us helping us to shoulder them.

Timothy Rees, Bishop of Llandaff earlier last century wrote a hymn expressing this:

“God is love and he enfoldeth,
All the world in one embrace,
With unfailing grasp he holdeth,

Every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow's iron rod,
Then they find that selfsame aching,
Deep within the heart of God.

Also apposite here is the story from Elie Weisel's "Night" – a small boy in a concentration camp was hanged for stealing bread. His weight was too low to bring about a quick death and he died slowly and painfully. "Where is your God now?" someone whispered in the watching crowd. "He is here" someone answered, "hanging on the end of that rope".

It is very easy in our pastoral encounters to allow ourselves to be manoeuvred into a position where we can convince ourselves that to say something or to preach something bold would be pastorally insensitive and, of course, sometimes it would be, but at times it might be because one doesn't like facing reality or awkward facts or struggling with the truth when it comes to difficult theological questions about God and the world especially if they impact directly on the lives of those we are trying to help.

The same thing is true of our prayer lives. One has to pray to God in the light of our experiences of him and of events in our lives and one has to help congregations to do that as well. We cannot in our prayers leave out the awkward bits either by ignoring them or pretending they haven't occurred.

Some people somehow believe that it's not quite respectable or proper to bring all of their concerns to God, or to lambast God with feelings of rage and anger. If they feel anger, in the way that Potter felt it and took shots against undamaged crucifixes on the war front, they suppress that feeling. That's not the way you treat God according to many people – genteel, good manners are really the way to cope with Him.

For many people, prayer is not prayer, if you drag into the encounter things that are problematic or show feelings of anger. Whatever tempests may be raging inside you, you have to present your best face to God.

Well, these people haven't read their Bibles properly, for the Bible is, as you know, not one book but a library of books, written and re-written over many centuries. And these books are full of stories of people trying to make sense of their belief in God in the light of their experience of life. And because these stories are about human beings like you and me, they express the full range of human emotions and feelings appropriate to those experiences, be they of happiness or sadness. In fact, we are so used to treating the scriptures as a holy book that we forget how shocking some of the passages are, especially when people feel that God has given them a raw deal, or let them down. The full range of human emotions is present in these stories, as people struggle sometimes against the odds to hang on to their faith in God, as they face the most awful disasters and tragedies.

The Psalms, the Book of Job, the Book of Lamentations are full of complaints and anger against God – at His seeming unfairness or neglect, and they don't hesitate to tell the Almighty what they think of Him. To quote one Old Testament scholar, 'They look God in the eye and tell him how it is, and what they feel'. So Psalm 22 also used by Jesus on the Cross has these words 'My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken me, and art so far from saving me, from heeding my groans, O God, I cry in the daytime but Thou does not answer, in the night I cry but get no respite'.

This Psalm 22, as many of the Psalms do, remind God of his obligation, and ask Him why He has abandoned His servant. Psalm 22 goes on to remind God that is it fine for Him to sit enthroned on high, listening to praises and to have saved people in the past, but where is He now when He is needed – nowhere to be found as the Psalmist puts it 'scorned by men and despised by the people'.

Or take Moses in the Book of Exodus Chapter 5 22-3 when he asks God why he hasn't delivered the people of Israel from the hand of Pharaoh. It is a very honest and direct prayer 'why has Thou done evil to this people – Thou hast not delivered them at all'. But in addition to asking God why he hasn't acted to counteract Pharaoh's activities against the Israelites, Moses also wants to know why he's left him powerless as a leader. So he pours out his anguish and frustration to God.

Or take the Book of Job – the book par excellence that looks God in the eye and tells Him how it is. As you know, Job loses his livelihood, his status, his health and his family, but refuses to accept the conventional wisdom of the day on these matters, expounded to him by his friends, that this is somehow God's punishment of him for sins he must have committed, because in Job's day, people connected suffering with sinfulness. Job pleads his innocence and pours out his grief and his anger to God. He accuses God of not treating him justly – he accuses Him of being a tyrant, and a brutal sadist, and even compares God to an animal, for God is tearing him apart as an animal would his prey. 'Thou dost hunt me like a lion, and again work wonders against me'. So Job issues tirade after tirade at God for treating him so badly.

In these instances quoted from Holy Scripture, the people concerned are not afraid to voice in their prayers their real feelings, emotions and concerns. They are not afraid to bring their whole selves into the presence of the Almighty. They are not afraid to have a real relationship with God, to be honest with God about how they feel things really are. And you can only do that when you feel secure and safe. It is only our families or really close friends who see us as we are, when we sound off, because we know that it is safe to drop our guard and to remove our masks and say what we really feel with them and to them.

So at a time of darkness – be that darkness the darkness of our own personal lives, or darkness in the time of our nation and church, we have to acknowledge the situation we may be in before God, for if we don't, our prayers are not only bland and insipid – they are fundamentally

dishonest. It's a bit like pretending that all is well in a relationship when, in fact, you are boiling with rage and frustration. We do not have to spare God's feelings and we have plenty of examples from Holy Scripture to help us.

Someone writing about all this says that the church tends to sing happy songs in the face of raw reality. We tend to be polite and restrained in our prayer, not reflecting the negativity and disharmony we may actually be feeling. And he goes on to suggest that our feelings are not reflected in our prayers, because we do not have enough faith in God to be certain of His mercy. "We feel", he says, "that we have to be compulsively cheerful or downright deceitful. The prayers uttered in Scripture, however, are really in touch with God because there is a passionate engagement with Him. We are too frightened to pray our anguish as our Scriptural forebears did".

Perhaps that is why I like the poetry of R. S. Thomas, bleak as it is at times, for he too looks God in the eye and tells it as it is:

'Storming at him,
as Job stormed with the eloquence
of the abused heart'.

Or

And on Judgement Day he will:
'bellow his defiance
at you over the grave's maw'

There is a story in a book by Simon de Vries called 'The Blood of the Lamb'. A father is visiting his very sick daughter in hospital. It is her birthday and he is taking her a birthday cake. When he arrives on the ward, he discovers that she has died, and so he goes to the Chapel and throws the birthday cake at the Crucifix on the Altar and rails against God. That to my mind, is real prayer and real engagement. So at such a time as this, when our world seems at times to be spinning out of control, we need honesty in our prayers to God.

The paradox is that only when all passion is spent, and the pain and the anguish acknowledged, that things can be worked through, and the one praying can come out the other side. It's only after his rage and outburst that Job can proclaim 'I know that my Redeemer lives and that He stands upon the earth, and my eyes shall behold and not another'.

Through their honesty, the Psalmist and Job find that their faith, so far from being diminished and crushed, is strengthened, for it is a faith that has faced the worst that can happen to it. To quote a poem that I came across recently 'they saw the dark and felt the light'.

For many of the biblical stories are not pious tales of how you should feel when you face a terrible tragedy but how men and women actually feel faced with the brutality of life and their

faith is forged on the anvil of their experiences. And our job as clergy in our liturgical ministry and pastoral encounters is to open up the scriptures in this way so that faith is deepened not abandoned. God, after all, seems to prefer the fury of Job as opposed to the mealy mouthed obeisance of his comforters.

So, we have to face the facts, when it comes to both our faith and our prayers and help others face them if we are to be of use as Ministers of the Gospel. Intellectual rigour and pastoral sensibility have to go hand in hand, when people ask us difficult questions they deserve honest answers that have been thought through and prayed through.

Now I know the situation is different in the USA to Britain, but we also have to face the facts about the culture we live in if we are to be of use as pastors.

90% of people in Britain may say they believe in God but they never darken the doors of a church building. People feel alienated by the church, by its rules and regulations, language and liturgy. How do we connect with such people and recapture their imaginations as they search for meaning and value?

One writer expresses it like this “We need to seek with the searchers, provide new roots to the uprooted and give direction to those who in a despair they are not consciously aware of, live by the horoscope, and gently touch the deeper stirrings of the hearts of those who know that what they enjoy today cannot be all that there is”.

All that requires sensitivity and patience and great openness. It is Hans Kung who says that “Authority cannot rest on external title or office, but on an inner authority that is based on personal quality, factual competence and partnership”. Those entrusted with any ministry must be in tune with the reality of the world as it is, people who can communicate with it in language it can understand – people who have vision and missionary enterprise that relates to our contemporary culture.

But if the world has changed, the church has changed as well. At Pentecost all God’s people are empowered by the Spirit and given gifts. Responsibility for ministry has been given to all of us at our baptism and we all share the responsibility of making Christ’s love known to the world around us as the bishop reminds congregations at an ordination. In other words the ordained and those of us who are licensed are not there to do everything on behalf of the baptised but to lead them in building a vision for the work of the church in the community, in helping them to grow in confidence and faith, and in providing them with the tools to become efficient ministers of the Gospel ready to engage thoughtfully and confidently with the challenges with which the world presents us.

Clergy often think that it is only the clergy who are called by God. In the New Testament however the calling of a person is a call to the acceptance of new life in Christ. In 1.Cor.7, Paul says “Let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him and in which God has called

him” or in 1.Cor.1, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus.” Vocation is God’s initiative in summoning human beings to be conformed to the image of his Son. 1Peter 29-10 refers to the high priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of the whole Church. Baptism, in the end, is the fundamental Christian sacrament, not ordination. Or as Moltmann puts it “There is need that out of a church for the people which takes care of the people there should come a church of the people”.

The ordained minister exists to resource the people of God. As John Stott puts it “one of the functions of the ordained ministry is to multiply not to monopolise ministry”. And as John Robinson once put it “you can have as high a doctrine of the ministry as you like, provided your doctrine of the Church is higher”. It is not a question of the laity helping the clergy to do what is regarded as the latter’s work - rather of the clergy helping the laity to minister to do the church’s work.

The ordained Ministry is not the church – it exists to help the church be the church. He/she ministers to the church in order that the Church members can be ministers, for most people are drawn in to the life of faith through the influence of families and friends.

Our task then , as ordained people, becomes more important, not less, as we seek to help the church and all its members minister in the world rather than to do it for it. Like the leader of an orchestra we play no instrument ourselves but draw out the gifts of everyone else. And those who exercise leadership amongst a pilgrim people must realise that they too have to remain pilgrims open to the gift of God’s spirit as they work in partnership with the whole people of God. Those who are called to teach must also be willing to learn, those who are called to speak must also be listeners, and those called to lead must know themselves to be partners in ministry with many others.

Reinhold Niebuhr put his finger on it when he wrote, “The priest faces the problem of preaching repentance without lowliness and of criticising without spiritual pride ... think of sitting Sunday after Sunday under some professional holy person who is constantly asserting his egotism by criticising yours. I would rebel if I were a layperson. A spiritual leader who has too many illusions is useless; one who has lost his illusions about humanity and retains his illusions about himself is insufferable. Let the process of disillusionment continue until the self is included. At that point, of course, only religion can save from the enervation of despair. But it is at that point that true religion is born”.

The truth of the matter is, of course, that if one is unwilling to face the truth about oneself one will not be willing to face the truth about anything else either.

In this lecture, although I have not mentioned these words specifically, I have spoken about the intellectual, the spiritual and the pastoral aspects of ministry. Clergy are called to serve God and congregations with their minds - that is intellectually, through their prayers and teaching about it – that is spiritually, and in their care for people – that is pastorally. Ministry demands intellectual

discipline. We have to ensure that we clear space in what are obviously busy lives to read “show me the books in a person’s study” Hensley Henson, a 19th century Bishop of Durham used to say, “and I will tell you when his mind died”. Without space for reading and reflecting, there is a danger of becoming vacuous or trite.

Clergy are called to prayerful living – to live life in the presence of God not just prayers and seeing a God dimension in all things and so needs to be given to it as does proper pastoral care. The temptation sometimes in ministry is to exalt one of these aspects – the intellectual, spiritual or the pastoral, above the others. We need a balance because all three are equally important. If we so concentrate our ministry on the intellectual aspect or studying theology, that it leaves little time for anything else, our ministry will be stunted – stunted because we will have become so concerned with cultivating our intellect, that concern for people and for God will go out of the window. We may end up knowing a great deal about God but perhaps not know God at all.

Or if we so concentrate on ministering to people that we have no time for prayer or study, we will soon find that our lives are one round of frantic ecclesiastical activity, so anxious being busy, that we never stop to ask what we are being busy about. Pastoral work and action have to be routed in the life of the Spirit. Action can only grow out of thought and contemplations.

If we exalt the spiritual so much that we lose sight of the pastoral and the intellectual, then we will have been guilty of misunderstanding the very nature of the spiritual life. It ought to make us people who are more not less concerned about God’s world.

But if these three aspects are important, we have also to remember that we can’t keep the intellectual, the spiritual and the pastoral in such separate boxes that they have nothing to say to one another because as I have tried to show, what we read and study ought to affect the way we pray and theology ought to affect what we say to people in their moments of greatest need. There is a play called “Whose Life is it anyone” where Ken, once a brilliant sculptor, has been the victim of a severe road accident and is paralysed from the waist down and will never recover. He is visited by the hospital chaplain and this is what Ken says about him, “He seemed to think that I should be quite happy to be God’s chosen vessel, into which people could pour their compassion – that it was alright being a cripple because it made other people feel good when they helped me and I should now concentrate on my spiritual life”. In other words, inept theology led to pastoral bungling.

It is also possible in pastoral ministry unless we are careful to perpetuate and reinforce highly dependent attitudes. Very often, people who clamour for pastoral care don’t really want to be known, rather to be noticed. They don’t want to be led anywhere, but just to be reassured and reaffirmed. In effect they want a chaplain in their parish priest – a chaplain to a religious club and it’s very easy to collude in that and one always has the comfortable sheep and shepherd imagery to back it all up.

So in all of this, we need to confront our heads with our hearts and our hearts with our heads. As Thomas Merton put it, “Mysticism is not for saintly women, and theological studies for practical but unsaintly men, but the two are united and unless they are, there is no fervour, no life and no spiritual value in theology and no substance, no meaning and no surer rendition in the contemplativity of life”. We cannot, we must not, keep separate what properly belongs together and unless we do, we will be no use as pastors either.