

Pastoral Ministry: theological foundations

I made the assumption for many years that pastoral care was the term for social work in the church. It was about visiting the sick, providing for the poor, counseling the confused, befriending the lonely, caring for the needy, and helping people with their problems. This was the stuff pastors should do. Preachers preached, but pastors took care of people's social, relational, physical, emotional (and sometimes spiritual) needs. I think it's what most people take pastoral ministry to be and I don't think that's wrong but...incomplete.... But when you look at the phrase etymologically and scripturally a slightly wider understanding emerges.

The word pastor comes from Latin word for *shepherd*. *Pastoral ministry* is the ministry of *shepherding*. It's a leadership picture that uses the image of the shepherd to describe the roles and responsibilities of those who lead God's people. It's an idea that starts with God himself. God is *the* Shepherd and he leads his sheep where he wants them to go.

Arguably the most famous description of this comes from Psalm 23; pastoral ministry involving Leading others to green pastures, to still waters, restoring their souls and leading them in the paths of righteousness, as well as comforting and protecting....and with the end in mind being that we are to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. I mention this because sometimes I think we get confused about what we're aiming at in pastoral ministry – of course it involves binding up the broken and caring with compassion but there is a direction to this beyond simply meeting people's needs, and that is, under God's shepherding, to lead others into deeper relationship with God. Into His way as expressed in Jesus and into eternity with God.

To give an example, in terms of restoring the soul, take the musician Vedran Smailovic, who a mortar shells rained down on Sarejevo in the ugly civil war in Bosnia in the 90s did the only thing he could do – play the cello. In the midst of the destruction of buildings and the killing of family and friends, Vedran played, in full formal attire. No one knew where or when he would play, but as soon as he started crowds grew. Grieving and starving, the people gathered to listen. Why? As Vedran put it, "They were hungry, but they still had soul". Vedran's music spoke of another world of beauty, truth and goodness which was yet at hand, and became a source of hope and healing. "He will restore my soul".

Theological foundations for Pastoral Ministry

This sounds rather grand and there are many ways into this but today I want to ground pastoral ministry in our baptism. Who has been baptised here? Martin Luther said "we all crawl towards our baptism" by which I assume he meant we only slowly come to register what our baptism means and live out of it.

For the Church baptism is about dying to an old way of life and rising to a new way of life. Jesus comes up out of the water and receives the Spirit and hears the voice of the Father — “This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased”. So too the newly baptised Christian hears “You are my son/daughter” as that individual begins their new life in association with Jesus. To be baptised is to recover the humanity that God always intended. And what did God intend? He intended that human beings should grow into such love for Him that they could rightly be called God’s sons and daughters. Of course there is not an immediate transformation – we have to grow into our baptism, crawl towards it as Luther says or paraphrasing St Paul, we have been clothed with Christ but we have to grow into that clothing so it fits.

The story of Christianity is partly the story of how human beings have let go of their true human identity, abandoned it, forgotten it or corrupted it. What Jesus does is restore in his own person humanity to what it should have been. And what is more, comes to restore our humanity. So one might expect the baptised, those raised in Christ, like Christ to be near to those places where humanity is most in need of restoration. As Rowan Williams puts it, “Christians will be found in the neighbourhood of Jesus – but Jesus is found in the neighbourhood of human confusion and suffering, defencelessly alongside those in need. If being baptised is being led where Jesus is, then being baptised is being led towards the chaos and the neediness of a humanity that has forgotten its own destiny”. And of course we baptised Christians will also be in touch with some of the inhumanity and muddle inside ourselves, in touch with the depths of our own selves in need, but also in the depths of God’s love. This is a pretty solid basis for pastoral ministry.

Baptism involves both a washing, cleansing and re-creating AND a call to going with Jesus to the heart of human need *under the Holy Spirit’s guidance*. Now this is really important because one of the dangers of pastoral ministry is the deification of human agency and how we act on behalf of Jesus and in Jesus’ place, burning ourselves out and then resentfully pondering why God didn’t help us out. Actually, to open up to the Spirit and participate in Jesus way is in part to constantly re-discover and re-enact the Father’s embrace of Jesus in the Holy Spirit. The baptised person is not only in the midst of human brokenness and need but also in the middle of the love, delight and joy of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In short, to be engaged in pastoral ministry requires us not simply to be in earnest about the needs of others but also joyful in our sharing in God’s way.

But I fear our approach is rather more earnest than joyful, and that an implicit assumption is that once pain and need is alleviated, then there’ll be a place for joy. But joy for Jesus and joy in the gospel is not postponed or pushed back to an ever receding future; Jesus does not say “I have said these things so one day you can rejoice” he says ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

There’s much more to say about such things but for now, the baptised person is in the middle of two things that seem quite contradictory – in the middle of the heart of God, the ecstatic joy of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and in the middle of a world of brokenness, suffering, sin and pain. And just as Jesus takes his stand right in the middle of those two realities, so we do, for “where I am, there will my servant be also” Jn 12.26.

One of the ways our pastoral ministry can go awry is as we take our eyes off Jesus and fail to participate in his way - Geoffrey Howard gives a good example of this in his book Dare to Break Bread –

9.20am walk into church – Ernie is polishing the nave floor – “Ernie, I appreciate what you’re doing but please, not on a Sunday morning”.

9.51am walk into vestry, ill-prepared for worship – need the amount the fayre made yesterday from Brenda – find her only for her to issue a torrent of pent up emotion about another member of the congregation she had a conflagration with at the fayre.

9.54am on way back to vestry Ernie stops me – “I stopped polishing the nave as you asked and thought I’d do the kitchen floor and Dora tore me off a strip – pulled the plug out, she did”.

9.57am and the guitarist stops me – “can you tell the organist not to choose the hymns next time without consulting me?”

Half-an-hour later I’m on the chancel steps saying “peace be with you” and felt I should walk down among them but feel unable to do so; “Lord, I am nauseated by this hypocrisy – sworn enemies pretending to share the peace, their pettiness, bitterness, control-freakery”...and then Rev Geoffrey imagines Jesus’ response – I understand your exasperation Geoff – I spent 3 years with the 12 trying to get them to forget about themselves and live for me and one another. Teaching didn’t do it, nor miracles, even placing a child among them – they said they got it but they hadn’t...At that final meal I knew they would disown me but I wanted them to eat and drink of me all the same – even my betrayer – when I him the bread I gave him myself- he was taking me to do with me as he pleased. I gave myself unconditionally – that is what I do in the Eucharist. Later in the garden he led the soldiers to me and exchanged with me the kiss of peace. The peace I gave him was unconditional, it was not dependent on his accepting or returning it. Now Geoff, do you think that you can go down the chancel steps and do the same?

To sum up thus far, baptism restores an identity that has been forgotten or overlaid. Baptism takes us to where Jesus is, participating in His way, and therefore into closer neighbourhood with a disordered and fallen world, and into closer neighbourhood with others invited there. All of which grounds our pastoral approach.

Let me now suggest three dimensions of pastoral ministry arising from this – the prophetic, the priestly and the kingly. For many centuries the Church has thought of Jesus as anointed by God to live out a threefold identity; that of prophet, priest and king and these three ways of Jesus being human are to come to characterise us as well as the baptised.

First the prophetic. This is not primarily about telling the future but rather, as with the prophets of the Bible, to act and speak to people to call them back to their essential identity and who they are meant to be. It may seem surprising that pastoral ministry involves challenging people to be who they are meant to be, but that is part of the picture. To be the ones who, for example, look around the Church and might be prompted to say “Have you forgotten what you’re here for?” or “Have you forgotten the gift God gave you?” Stanley

Hauerwas, that rudest of theologians, tells of a time when he was in hospital in some pain and a young chaplain came by his bed and engaged Hauerwas as a clinical pastoral counsellor. Hauerwas looked straight at him and said "if you're not here to pray for me then you can go to hell". Not the politest way to be prophetic, but candid.

A gentler example is from Michael Mayne who just as he was becoming Dean of Westminster Abbey, suffered a bout of ME ... and in his book *A Year Lost, A year found*, reflected on those who visited him while in hospital. He writes of how John Donne said "as sickness is the greatest misery, so the greatest misery of sickness is solitude". He did feel cut off, in need of reassurance, and found the most effective response to be by touch and by prayer. "I was so grateful to the small number of priests who overcame their understandable shyness with a fellow-priest and laid hands on me and blessed me; and I knew which way I would decide in future when visiting sick people either at home or in hospital". (Of course with heightened concerns about safeguarding we need to be careful here – to ask permission and to be conscious of ensuring an "open" environment here).

Prophetic recalling to our essential identity needs to be done in gentle ways, nudging one another rather than nagging, being suggestive rather than censorious, often a quiet persistent re-calling of one another to what is most important. It can happen by the seriousness with which we approach worship, the attentiveness we offer a stranger, the care with which we greet someone...

Then there's the priestly role, and I speak here not simply of the ordained, but priestly in a wider sense. In the O.T. a priest was someone who interpreted God and humanity to one another, building bridges between human beings and God. One priest told me of how he took a wedding in May and at the reception sat next to a 20-something bridesmaid. They talked about his sermon and then about herself, and she explained that she could no longer believe because of the early and tragic death of her mother, and how God could be so ...indifferent. The priest didn't come up with any clever theodicy or clipped response to the problem of suffering but he did say "I've no idea what grief you carry but I do believe this, that God was the first to weep when your mother died". The young woman was clearly moved by this response and it resonated with her earlier understanding of God – and I mention it as an example of a small step towards building bridges between humanity and God.

More widely our liturgical leadership is part of our pastoral care, enabling people to attend to God, whether that's the adoration of humility of which Charles Simeon speaks or the astonished reverence for God of which Dallas Willard writes, or in terms of Eugene Peterson's reflections as a pastor, he writes "I was not primarily dealing with people as problems. I was a pastor calling them to worship God". That's quite a shift, of course every congregation has plenty of problems and inadequacies but Peterson is suggesting we don't define the congregation by its collective problems but rather as a company of people defined by their creation in the image of God, living souls whom the pastor regards not as problems to be fixed but as who they are, children of God called to be in communion with God.

And the kingly role. John's Gospel is replete with allusions to Jesus as King, a kingship coming in humility and service, revealed through death and resurrection, and across the gospels Jesus proclaims the Good News of the availability of His Kingdom here and now if we would but have it. And our royal calling is, under Christ to share in this kingly rule, showing in our relationships and our engagement with the world something of God's own freedom, God's own liberty to heal and restore. An academic critical of Jean Vanier's work was studying a French L'Arche community for a short while, and he was asked to lead a grace one evening. Not knowing French he began to stumble through the extensive thanksgiving – at which point one of the profoundly mentally disabled members of the community, Pierre, began to become alert. As the academic struggled on Pierre gestured his support and encouragement, touching the academic's arm. The academic was deeply moved. Pierre recognised what struggle looked like and the academic began to realise that he had despised these people because he feared them. And he feared them for revealing his own weakness, powerlessness and inability to make them strong. And here was Pierre showing him the way, that in the midst of struggle and weakness he was saying "it's ok, you are important, I believe in you, you are invaluable". Liberating and healing, kingly work from a place of humility and service.