

MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD: A METHODIST ACCOUNT

By DAVID TRIPP

DO YOU WANT me, dear editors, to try to describe the way christian ministerial priesthood seems to be developing in my Church — or the way that ministry, as inherited from the past, has moulded me? This is quite a question, for our old ordination rite, derived through John Wesley and the Church of England from the Reformer, Martin Bucer, was replaced in 1975 by a much simplified version of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Scheme's order for presbyters. As I see it, the new rite preserves the theological essence of the old one, but dilutes its spirituality. Here, as everywhere, public change means some personal disarray, for there is a feeling that my Church does not stand quite where it did, and some of the old props do not feel quite so secure.

This is more than a personal problem. In all the districts I have served in, I have been Probationers' Secretary (responsible for the in-service training of ordinands), and the interpreting of the ordination rite, as part of that preparatory training, has been a constant professional duty.

The fulcrum of the ordination rite is the central sequence:

Exhortation
Examination
Prayer and Laying on of Hands.¹

It has been argued that the Examination and the preceding Exhortation are too didactic to be central, and should be omitted; but, placed as they are before the prayer, they are clearly designed to inform the intentions with which the prayer is to be offered. The ordination vows are not just contractual conditions upon which ordination is conferred, but point to some of the ways we should expect God to fulfil the petitions made by the Church at ordination.

¹ Cf The Methodist Service Book (1975), pp 98-112.

1. *To define christian ministry*

(a) *Within the ministry of the whole Church.* 'God and Father of all' — as reads our ordination prayer — 'we praise you for your infinite love in calling us to be a holy people, a royal priesthood, a universal Church; and in giving us your son Jesus Christ our Lord to be the Head of the Church and the Shepherd of our souls'. In the exhortation, the President says, 'All who are baptized are called to make Christ known as Saviour and Lord, and to share with him in the renewing of his world. You are called to the ordained Ministry within the ministry of the whole Church'.

These passages, of course, express the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. This is not the place to waste time on controversy, but I must fill in some background. The protestant unwillingness to characterize christian ministry as sacerdotal was originally part of a corrective to some theories of the eucharistic sacrifice, which seemed to compromise the unique mediatorial status of Christ. Only since the latter part of the last century has the royal priesthood of the whole Church (mentioned in 1 Peter and the Apocalypse) been set up as a formal doctrine and made the basis of a theology of ministry alternative to the supposed catholic one.

Behind this elaborated doctrine three quite disparate motifs may be traced:

- (i) It seemed to offer a rationale for an ordained ministry that lacks any obvious claim to 'apostolic succession'.
- (ii) It invoked an element of New Testament theology that encouraged a positive interpretation of the whole Body of Christ; and,
- (iii) It appealed to many lay-people as a curb on the pride of professional clergy — and to many Free Church ministers and laity as a defence against the arrogance of Establishment parsons who were increasingly asserting both their equality with Roman Catholics and their superiority over Dissenters by pushing their title as 'priests'.

Motifs (i) and (ii) have some theological dignity; the third is merely nasty. But here, as so often, the facts of Church history hold up an uncomfortable mirror to the soul. We Methodists are, in Britain, a minority Church with an eccentric sub-culture, and the resultant resentments frequently, if subliminally, distort our sense of who we are, not least in ministry. Preparation for ministry, and self-examination in it, sometimes need the exposure of these gruesome things.

However, the ecumenical encounter has lifted the discussion of the universal *sacerdotium* out of this miasma of mutual contempt, and we can here look at its constructive implications.

First, this doctrine tells me I am not a shaman, or a guru, or even a Kohen distinct from Levi and Israel. My calling is within a Body. Far from making me superior to, distanced from, the other elements in that Body, my being set apart within it makes me need them more, commits me to being with them, for them.

Secondly, it tells me that all my congregation (and not just the elected leaders of it), and indeed, all my fellow-Christians, whether they share this interpretation or not, have a share with me in Christ's service to the world for the Father: they have a right to invoke my support in interpreting their decisions, their sacrifices, their soul-tearing compromises, in their day-to-day responsibility. They offer, as of right, their counsel in the Church's affairs — *all* its affairs, not just balance-sheets and baby-minding. They will, in their differing ways, be pastors to each other in ways I cannot always match — and they will be shepherds to my soul, too, especially when I am short on hope or humility.

Thirdly, it explains for me, in part, why God has revealed more of himself to some of my laity than he ever has to me.

Yes, of course, there are dangers here. This doctrine can encourage the view that the minister is just a full-time religious functionary, that distinctions of christian ministries are just a dishing-out of jobs. It can provoke lay arrogance and clerical cowardice, 'We're all in this together, so don't blame *me*'. It can erode personal responsibility and theological fidelity under the cover of supposed humility. But this is not to discredit the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. It is just that this doctrine is not the whole story.

(b) *This same ministry.* 'We thank you that by his death he has overcome death, and having ascended into heaven has abundantly poured forth his gifts; making some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. . . . We thank you that you have now called these your servants to this same ministry. . . .' We equate our presbyteral ministry with that *presbyterion* established by the apostles in the aftermath of the resurrection (and hold the older catholic view that the distinction of *episkopos* and *presbyteros* is secondary to that first, unitive, office). It is that office, interpreted in the light of Jesus's mission of the Twelve and of the Seventy, that is our model.

It was an Anglican (Robertson of Brighton) who, oddly enough, seems to have first tried to defend protestant ordinations by arguing that protestant ministries were 'prophetic', not 'priestly', like 'catholic' ones. This was, ironically, seized on as an anti-anglican argument by Free Churchmen — and then used charitably by a

roman catholic writer to rehabilitate anglican orders! But surely this is all mistaken? Comparison of christian ministry with prophecy, or with jewish *sacerdotium* may be helpful ('would that all the Lord's people were prophets' — or think of Eleazar and Ithamar as a standing proof that delegation is a duty!); but it is the apostolic *presbyterion* which is the model, and it has no complete precedent except in Christ himself.

There are echoes, of course. 'Presbyter' points back to Moses's elders in the wilderness, who laid their hands on the sacrifice for the Day of Atonement; so my presbyterate means that I, at the altar, identify Christ's ecclesial body with his sacrificial body. And do not 'bishop', 'presbyter' and 'deacon' sum up between them the twofold role of the shepherd? So in my colleagueship with non-presbyteral ministries I hear the summons of the ordaining President: 'You must set the Good Shepherd before you as your pattern'.

2. *Specific tasks — for the Body*

It will be your task as ambassadors on behalf of Christ to preach the Gospel by word and deed, to declare God's forgiveness to penitent sinners, to baptize, to confirm, to preside at the celebration of the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, to lead God's people in worship and prayer, to care for them in sickness and in health, to teach them and to equip them for their service.

Preaching has always been the methodist thing, and the place where we start to understand ministry — the work of an apostle who speaks for the Incarnate Word. As a result, our worship can degenerate into mere noise; but, when it is truly itself, preaching generates a worship in which prayer and sacrament have an essential place.

Declaring forgiveness, the ministry of reconciliation (penance) has been played down by Protestants, except as a corporate exercise. But it has an entrenched place in the New Testament scheme of ministry.

To baptize, to confirm. With our laity, and with all other Churches, we agonize over baptismal discipline; and in the admission to confirmation we share jurisdiction with the local Church Council.

Christ's Body and Blood: I am grateful that my Church neither imposes nor prescribes any one explanation of Christ's words. 'What his word doth make it, that I believe and take it', expresses very well the ground on which Methodists meet. Accidental rarity of celebration has long discouraged Methodists from making the most of their own sacramental heritage — and charges from outside of being 'unsacramental' have not helped.

Leading worship and prayer: the preaching services, and a whole plethora of corporate devotions.

Caring: a ministry shared with, and largely made possible through information provided by, so many of our laity. The sick are a great responsibility; but keeping up with the healthy and busy is a *problem*.

Teaching: after years of assuming too slickly that everyone knew it all or of being afraid of the arcane depths of scripture, our Church is reviving its teaching ministry. We still ask ordinands for a commitment to the teaching of scripture, our sovereign doctrinal standard, and secondarily to 'the doctrines of the christian faith as this Church has received them' from the Fathers and the Reformation — though, for some of us, our Church's admission, in its doctrinal statements, that it is open to correction by other Christians, has been a life-saver. We no longer ask ordinands if they will 'drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's word'. Perhaps this invitation to be *malleus haereticorum* was too heady for spiritual health, but this age's efflorescence of cults has not lessened our controversial tasks.

All this is 'to equip' God's 'people for the work of ministry', so their needs and opportunities must inform all I do — at least, all that I do in public, for I have also my personal *sacerdotium* to fulfil. Yet even in my public person, though my priesthood is representative of that of all my people, I am not primarily their representative, but an ambassador for Christ. I have, for example, an inescapably personal share in mission to the unbelieving, to 'seek and serve his sheep that are scattered abroad, for whom he laid down his life', and not to rest cocooned in the community of faith. But how do I meet them? Stay long enough with them to know and be known? And persuade my congregation that I have any right to do anything but look after them?

Methodists have always emphasized the calling of christian people to be made holy in love, and also God's promise that this calling can be realized. We used to ask ordinands, '. . . will you do all that is in you to build up the Body of Christ, to persuade every member to exercise the gift of grace that is in him, and to present every man before God perfect in Christ Jesus?' This survives in softened form: 'Never cease from your work of love, until you have done all in your power to bring them to full obedience to Christ'. Is it entirely quixotic to order your ministry to the making of saints? And is it irresponsible to observe that sanctity often grows in our flock *despite* what we do?

Ministry within the Body cannot but be ordered also to the Body's harmony. In our vow of obedience we still have what may be seen as the minimum admission of that principle. But I deeply regret the

omission of this question: 'Will you maintain and set forward, as much as lieth in you, quietness, peace and love among all christian people, and especially among them that are or shall be committed to your charge?' It laid upon us fair and square the responsibility for harmony in the congregation — and committed us to an apostolate of ecumenism. And when, at times, our own Church has faltered in the pursuit of unity, that vow has been the inner charter of convinced ecumenists, the quiet pledge of our Church's better self.

3. *Personal pressures*

'Will you be faithful in prayer?' But how? Time and again, my prayer has fallen apart. The life of other Christians and other Churches has been constantly my reproach and my solace. We have no prescribed version of the Daily Office, and I am only glad that another Church's form (in my case, the Liturgy of the Hours, imperfectly celebrated) is possible in good conscience.

'Will you be faithful . . . in the reading of the holy scriptures and in those studies which will help you to understand and expound them?' For an academic, this is the one pastoral duty that comes naturally. There is no shortage of possibilities — for me, novels and poetry are theological texts, too! — but what of time? stamina? money?

'This ministry will make great demands on you and your household'. A Church with a married clergy has always been tempted to use the manse family as a collective curate/church caretaker/etc. But, however much I try to shield my family from this, it is still true that my style of family life is part of my priesthood. I am constantly grateful that my Church has frequently insisted in recent years that time spent just being husband and father is itself an exercise of ministerial calling.

The old question, 'Will you be diligent to frame and fashion your own selves, and your families, according to the doctrine of Christ; and to make both yourselves and them, as much as in you lieth, wholesome examples and patterns to the flock of Christ?', however much authorized by 1 Timothy, was dropped as being too male-orientated and too authoritarian — and as being inapplicable to unmarried ordinands (though I must record that, in my observation, our unmarried ministers have had an authentically christian home life, as much a model of christian domesticity as that of their married colleagues).

The worse pressures are those of time — and when so many church events must take up our evenings, where do growing children fit in, or working wives? — and of relationships. How can you minister with people unless you love them? Love and personal

affection cannot always be prevented from coalescing, and then danger is never far away. For those of us to whom human beauty and affection are theophanies, this whole area is one of inspiration and of torment. And if you are one of those people for whom deep love for one person is intensified by deep love for another. . . .

But the problem is, I think, inescapable. The person of the ministerial priest is more than persona — the giving of the self is, at the very least, near to the heart of sacrifice.

4. *The theology of ordination*

One thing we have all recently re-learned is that ordination is an act of prayer — prayer within covenant, and therefore, though not mechanically efficacious, always answered. (The theologians will say I am a Scotist — but they cannot touch me for it). Authority has its role and succession, whether through bishops or Conference, has its role as a sign of God's faithfulness; and personal vocation, offered, tested and ratified, has its role — but the essential process is our dependence upon God, expressed in prayer, and the dependability of God, who answers prayer.

One way he answers prayer, again and again, in my life of ministerial priesthood is the way he saves me from my own impetuous heart by the goodness of the people he trusts me with. We are back where we began.