

## **THE CHRISTIAN PRIEST TODAY**

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**by Rowan Williams**

Some years ago, ACCM, as it then was, embarked on a study designed to clarify the question, ‘what ordained ministry does the Church of England require?’ in the hope of assisting colleges and courses to focus on appropriate priorities. As these exercises go, it was fairly successful, and made theological educators do a bit more theology about their own teaching of theology and its goals; but the very phrasing of the question reveals a rather typically Anglican quirk, the tendency to approach theological issues by description. Another tradition might well say you ought to begin by asking what ordained ministry God requires (let alone what Church of England God requires), and sorting out all your theological priorities from first principles.

But we should hesitate a little before assuming that the ACCM question shows us only a rather faded pragmatism. It is quite possible to come back and say, ‘But it may be precisely in working out what the Church of England requires that we find out what God requires’; that is, we discover God’s will for ordained ministry in the process of discovering what the Church needs in order to be itself, what the Church needs for its integrity, its mission, its intelligibility to itself. And this is just the process we see at work in the book commemorated in the title of today’s lecture, Michael Ramsey’s *The Christian Priest Today* — that book rightly described by Douglas Dales as ‘the most treasured book that Bishop Michael ever wrote’. At the end of his immensely rich second chapter, he writes: ‘In describing the priest’s office... I have followed an empirical approach, beginning with the Church’s practical experience and working back from this to an understanding of the ministry.’ But he goes on to say that ‘it is far from true that while the Church is our Lord’s creation the ministry is only a device whereby the Church can be effective’ (2nd edn 1987, p.10). Looking at what in fact is needed ought to open up the whole question of what God requires — but also of what God has given: and any reflection on the Christian priest today has to be a reflection not just on what we find helpful but on what has been provided for the Church. This is Michael Ramsey’s method, and it crucially reminds us that we are in trouble if we start thinking that ordained ministry is an idea developed by us to make things run more smoothly.

This isn't about going back into the deadlocked debates over whether Christ explicitly established one form of ministry to be valid forever; even in the sixteenth century, Hooker was critical of those who claimed absolute certainty about this. But it is about getting away from a view of the Church that is very seductive and very damaging — and very popular. This is the view that the Church is essentially a lot of people who have something in common called Christian faith and get together to share it with each other and communicate it to other people 'outside'. It looks a harmless enough view at first, but it is a good way from what the New Testament encourages us to think about the Church — which is that the Church is first of all a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God's sons and daughters), and that what we have to do about the Church is not first to organise it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape. It is a place where we can see properly — God, God's creation, ourselves. It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God. It is a place we are invited to enter, the place occupied by Christ, who is himself the climate and atmosphere of a renewed universe.

Forget this, and you're stuck with a faith that depends heavily on what individuals decide and on what goes on inside your head. But if the Church really is larger and more mysterious than this, if the Church is Christ's place, it is a reality shaped — not in the remote past, but daily, here and now — by Christ's action. And that action is most deeply the unbroken movement of self-forgetful love towards the one he calls Abba, Father: all Jesus is on earth is an expression of this — his forgiving, his healing, his parables, his shared meals, his death and his resurrection. In eternity and in time, Christ makes himself a gift; and in the turbulence and violence of human history, that gift is a gift that makes peace between humanity and God. It is a sacrifice; not in the sense of a bribe to persuade a hostile deity to overlook our failings, but in the sense of something given up, handed over, so that a mutual relationship may be both affirmed and recreated.

Being in the Church is being in the middle of this sacrificial action, the act of Christ's giving; it is being in the climate, the landscape, of priesthood. This is what is given to us as Christians, what we are rather incompetently trying to find words and structural forms for in our daily life as a human institution. The point is that the energy for this searching for words and forms is created by the fact of God's gift, not by any attempt to make a

human community run better; it is an energy devoted to what will show the inner and prior fact. And this is where we turn again to the New Testament. When Christ calls, he calls, we are told, into a community with diverse roles and tasks, not into a mass of individuals vaguely looking for things to do; and one of those roles, from the beginning, is that of apostle. The apostle is given the task of witness, above all; the apostle has to point in word and action to the basic facts of the action of Christ, to witness to time spent in the company of Jesus, before and after his resurrection (Acts 1.21-22, 4.13). The apostle is the one to whom responsibility is given for connecting this or that context, this or that community, with the fact of Jesus — and so of connecting communities with each other also.

Thus when Christ calls human beings into the community where the new creation begins, he calls some, from the very beginning, to be simply witnesses of that community's character. Initially, they are those whose words connect the hearers with Christ; they make Christ contemporary with all who hear the good news. And as the immediate personal link fades with the passage of time, the Church makes it clear that the task of witnessing to the contemporaneity of Christ is still essential to the Church's integrity in a twofold way — by the recognition of a fixed canon of Scripture as God's gift in the Spirit to the Church, a gift that is an act of divine speaking as it is read and received in the community; and by the recognition of apostolic ministry as a continuing element in the Church's constitution. The personal focus of worship and proclamation in the community is one who has publicly and demonstrably received, by a network and sequence of specific relationships, the word and power of the first witnesses.

The Church is therefore always a body which has built into its very structure a twofold measure of its honesty and fidelity, a twofold means of self-questioning and self-criticism, Bible and public ministry. The Church is never left to reimagine itself or reshape itself according to its own priorities of the moment; for it to be itself, it has received those gifts that express and determine its essential self as a place where the eternal self-giving of Christ is happening in such a way as to heal and change lives. The Bible and the ministry constitute the Church as literally a 'responsible' community, answering to what is there before it. And as the understanding of ordained ministry has developed, what this has come to mean is that this ministry is one of the things that renders every local community in its witness and worship responsible to the creative source of the Church's life.

What does this begin to mean for the priest today? If this account of the inextricable involvement of apostolic ministry with the very identity of the Church is right, the person exercising that ministry has one fundamental task which breaks down into a number of different responsibilities. The fundamental task is that of announcing in word and action in the middle of the community what the community is and where it is; it is telling the Church that it is the created universe insofar as that universe has been taken up into the activity of the eternal Word and transfigured by this fact, and that it is in consequence the place where Christ's self-offering continues to be most freely real and effective. The priest is therefore in the business of — as we could put it — immersing in Christ's action the gifts and prayers and love of human beings. These things, of themselves, are too weak and compromised to make peace, to sustain the loving relation of God with creation; so they are borne along by the one action that truly and eternally makes peace, the self-giving of the Word. In all this, we can perhaps see why and how the Eucharist is the central identifying act of the Church, simply because it is where our action towards God is taken up in God's action towards God; where the making our own of Christ's prayer at his table opens us up to receive Christ's life so that our own self-offering may be anchored afresh in his. 'Although we be unworthy... to offer unto thee any sacrifice, yet we beseech thee to accept this our bounden duty and service'.

For this to happen in the ministerial life, there must be skill and willingness and space for at least three things. The priest has to be free to be a lookout, an interpreter, and what I can best call a weaver.

### **The Watchman**

The priest must first of all be free to see. The language of the Hebrew Scriptures about the prophet as watchman (as in Habakkuk and Ezekiel) comes into its own here. The minister who has to tell the Church what and where it is must be free to see what and where it is. The entire point of being on watch is that you have the chance of seeing what others don't — not as a visionary privilege, but as a weighty and sometimes intensely painful responsibility undertaken for the sake of the whole community. 'Be aware', wrote Michael Ramsey, 'of the new and powerful trends in the world which bear upon the Church and its mission' (p.40). The priest has to have the opportunity of not being so swamped with 'duties' that he or she can't maintain a sense of the whole landscape. And this works both negatively and positively. Negatively, it has to do (as in Ezekiel) with seeing the

unwelcome relations of cause and effect over time, seeing what behaviours and habits erode the integrity of God's people. The priest has to be beyond cliché, challenging the obvious and consoling stories people may tell so as to see the real faultiness. 'The Church is declining', say some people, 'because of too much accommodation to the modern world'; 'no', say others, 'the Church is declining because of too little accommodation to the modern world'. The good priest will want to say no to both these bromides and turn to other kinds of reasoning. What if the weakness of the Church is to do with a range of neutral and irreversible social factors, or to do with a climate of anxiety and joylessness? Less obvious slogans, needing a lot of careful following through; but this requires some patient seeing of the long term history we're part of, and of the obscure inner rhythms and seasons of the Christian psyche. Those who have preached most effectively in this and other eras are, it seems to me, those who have known how to read the surface and the depths, but have had no great interest in the shallows. The effective and faithful priest is a witness to how Christ's offering takes up what is ours to make it a gift to God; if 'what is ours' is not the focus of patient and truthful attention, if the human complexity of what Christ came to share is not grasped, how can it be brought fully into the landscape of his sacrifice so that it can be transfigured?

This 'seeing', then, has to involve a fair bit of literacy about the world we're in — literacy about our culture (cultures, rather), about how our contemporary emotions and myths work, about the human heart. The priest's obligation to maintain such literacy is not just to do with the need to speak to people in the language they understand, in a missionary context; it is grounded in the need to show believers the world they live in and help them to respond not instantly or shallowly but with truthfulness and discernment. There has to be in every priest just a bit of the poet and artist — enough to keep alive a distaste for nonsense, cheapness of words and ideas, stale and predictable reactions. And this is a crucial part of being visibly a sign of what and where the Church is, the Church which is called to live 'in' the truth. So for the priest there is, as I've said, an urgent practical responsibility not to be so driven by what present themselves as duties and tasks that there is no time for this sort of education of seeing and listening, maintaining literacy in human reality. Along with whatever training to lead and manage that may be given in preparation for priestly ministry, along with instruction in theology and ethics, there must be active encouragement to nourish this seeing and listening, the novel and the

newspaper and the soap opera and the casual conversation— even (especially?) when it looks like wasting time from some points of view. Otherwise, what threatens is what Christianity's greatest critics (Nietzsche above all) have homed in upon — a Christian discourse that is essentially about unreal persons with unreal desires and fears.

### **The Interpreter**

And this leads into the second kind of responsibility, that of being an interpreter — by which I mean not primarily someone who interprets culture to and for the Church or interprets the Church's teaching to the world outside, but someone who has the gift of helping people make sense to and of each other. Communities, in spite of the sentimental way we sometimes think of them, don't just happen. They need nurture, they need to be woven into unity (more of that in a moment). If the unity of the Church is not that of a mass of individuals with a few convictions in common but that of a differentiated organism where the distinctiveness of each is always already in play, then for the Church to be consciously itself, it needs people to see and show how diversity works together. Sometimes this is a role of active co-ordination, drawing out gifts and deploying them, sometimes it is helping some people see that what others do is bound up with what they themselves do. It is articulating why different styles of mission and service serve each other — and sometimes articulating why different styles are harming or subverting each other. Interpretation can be involved with discipline and warning as well as harmonisation.

Put more theologically, it is about helping believers to see Christ in one another. The interpretative work of the priest looks first at how to uncover for one person or group the hidden gift in another — especially when the first impression is one of alienness and threat. The priest is the instrument by which God's generosity is laid bare, and thus by which generosity becomes possible for believers. Of course, it can turn into a sort of sentimentality, an optimistic 'I am right and you are right and all is right as right can be' blandness. But the task of actually showing Christ is harder — showing not a generalised acceptability in another person and producing a generalised tolerance, but showing the specific challenges and graces of the real Jesus, and producing a specific gratitude. So the priest has to ask, Where in this life and witness is the healing and absolving of Jesus, where is the summons of Jesus to penitence, where is the bearing of the cross, where is the resurrection? In the context of conflict within the Church, local

or global, the priest as a human participant charged, like it or not, with making particular decisions, may have to take sides at some points; but before and beyond that, the priest has to remind everyone involved of what and where they are, and so of the expectation that, if the Church is what it claims, Christ will be visible on both sides in certain ways.

This can also involve showing people the suffering Christ in each other. One of the painful things priests (not to say bishops and archbishops...) have to hear is two parties expressing with equal anger and grief the sense that the other is always the favoured one, that they are powerless victims. The liberal and the traditionalist will give an uncanny echo to each other as each insists that their pain and anxiety are ignored by the powerful opposition who control everything. So that before further battle is joined, there is a role for the priest in enjoining a pause to ask, Can I see not only my suffering but the other's? Can I see the cross not in my experience but in theirs? Put it boldly: the priest sometimes has to speak not only as parent to the prodigal son, but as parent to the elder brother who can only see his brother's forgiveness as his own humiliation and loss.

### **The Weaver**

And it is in interpreting people, especially believing people, to each other at this level that the priest has to act as the 'weaver' of communal life. The Church is, as we've noted, a variegated body, not a chaotic mass trying to apportion jobs; but it still needs a kind of orchestrating in order to show the activity of the one Christ in the diverse roles and functions and gifts being exercised. This is what the priest's leadership in public worship and sacramental life makes visible: the Romanian theologian, Dumitru Staniloae, wrote that the priest's role was to 'assemble and concentrate' the Christian people at prayer. When the priest gives voice to the praying identity of Christians at the celebration of the Eucharist, our prayers are located where they need to be located, assembled and concentrated in the act of Christ. So much of the debate about 'lay presidency' misses the point here: when Christians pray together in a way that places them in and with Christ, publicly and ritually, the one who animates and co-ordinates this is giving expression to the priestly essence of the Church; the very least we can say is that it is a coherent and intelligible sign of this fact if the president is, routinely, precisely the person who is charged with telling the Church where and what it is, in his or her daily and lifelong service.

But the weaving, the building into differentiated unity that the priest is committed to, does not stop with the celebration of the Eucharist — though everything else done will take its energy and urgency from that. The priestly task is a making of connections at many levels. Paul tells us in II Corinthians that Christ's is a ministry of reconciliation, and that we have to realise in our relations with each other that peace which Christ has made for us with God. The priest may simply be connecting persons — bringing the alienated to meet each other, peacemaking in the individual or the collective context, addressing racial and social conflict, listening to the tensions over justice between men and women, struggling with how we find ways of speaking from the wealthy 'post-Christian' world of the North Atlantic into the anguish and frustration of the developing world and the Muslim nations. The priest may be connecting visions and ideas — building bridges between the gospel and human concerns (those concerns that he or she strives to keep alive as a lookout and a truth teller), working as an apologist who seeks to make faith humanly compelling. The priest may be brokering plans and aspirations in a local community through an Employment Forum, a community partnership.

It is a task that is necessarily profoundly co-operative, yet one in which there is an irreducible element of personal investment; which is why this aspect of priestliness can be so particularly draining and frustrating. To be yourself a place where lines of force intersect, where diverse interests and passions converge is one of the hardest aspects of that dimension of priestly life which is about living in the fantasies and expectations of others. It is unavoidably something to do with the heart of your personal being — and it is also something that can threaten your sense of yourself, your very integrity.

Is being a Christian priest today significantly different from what it was when Michael Ramsey wrote, or indeed when George Herbert or John Chrysostom wrote? Not really; but what I've been saying so far will already have hinted at some of what makes the role distinctively hard today (don't imagine it's harder than it's ever been; it's just that this is the particular way it's hard now). The role of lookout is complex when our culture is simply so diverse, and when we are constantly struggling with a climate of pervasive mild cynicism, where the corruption of a lot of our communication leaves you feeling very much at sea in trying to find words of transparent truthfulness. The interpreter's job is a nightmare when Christians are sometimes positively eager to conclude that they have nothing to say to each other. The weaver may feel his or her integrity disappearing in the effort to create a living web of generous relationship,

because we are all these days so much more self-aware, in sometimes less than helpful ways, aware of how we are seen and ‘read’ by others, and of the muddle of our own motivation.

All the more reason to ask the hard questions about what resources we need for such a work. And again, some of what I’ve already said may point a few directions here.

To be a lookout, telling unwelcome truths, you have to ask what sort of things make a trustworthy person. And one possible answer is that faithfulness is something that renders a man or woman trustworthy, the willingness to be consistent and patient. It can be the willingness to stick with a situation of disease and conflict, and not look for a quick and false solution. It can be the readiness to put thoughts of short-term success on hold. It isn’t realistic any longer (because communities themselves are so much less stable) to imply that the priest who spends thirty years in one parish is the pastoral ideal; yet there really are settings where a reluctance to spend significant time reinforces a community’s perception that they’re not worth much. And it’s worth saying that self-supporting local ministries (why do we like that negative term ‘NSM’ so much?) can be a very powerful affirmation in this context.

But faithfulness applies, even more importantly, to the formation of personal discipline — an unfashionable and faintly embarrassing word. Does our personal rhythm of prayer and study show the marks of patience, persistence, healthy scepticism about hasty expectations? Does it move on deep tides, able to hold still in periods of frustrated or numb feeling, unafraid of silence? This may be — should be — the most secret aspect of the ordained life in many ways; but somehow, mysteriously, I think that believing people get a sense of whether a priest’s life of prayer is or isn’t characterised by this sort of steadiness, the long breaths for the long haul.

The looking, the watching, on behalf of the community also requires that human hinterland I referred to earlier — a certain familiarity with just how human experience can be difficult and tragic. What plausibility is there in the words of someone who seems to see less in the world than others, whose understanding of the murkiness of human motivation and the frequency of human failure is smaller than that of the average believer? Here, surely, we stray in the direction of Nietzsche again, with his furious accusations that Christians create unreal emotions about unreal objects.

It is this familiarity with the face of humanity and this fidelity in prayer that equips us for the most demanding aspect of the interpreter's task. We can't uncover the face of Christ in people unless we have the habit of real attention to human faces in all their diversity — but also the habit of familiarity with the face of Christ. How do we recognise him, let alone help others to do so, if we are not spending time with that face, in the study of Scripture and in adoration and silence? Faithful and persistent looking into the face of Jesus is the essential condition for connecting people with each other; without that, all we can offer is human goodwill, human shrinking from the cost of conflict, our own limited skills of sympathy and listening. But if we try to remain familiar with Jesus, we believe that our listening and mediating has a sacramental dimension, mostly imperceptible to us, but real and energising. We are allowing some fuller reality in to the situation, the reality in whose climate we live: the priestly mediation of Christ.

Weaving the community together, then, while it draws out all our psychological and personal skills, is finally the work of Christ and the Spirit. To know that is to be grateful; and it is gratitude that sustains us in the tension of our own holding and plaiting together of the strands of human and Christian variety. If our ministerial priesthood is a making visible of what the Church is, it must be always referring itself to the action that makes and keeps it; if we know what that action really is, we shall be thankful. Gratitude and theology belong together (surprisingly?). Theology is supposed to let us know the depth and dimension of what has been done, the scale of the landscape we inhabit, so that we are less likely to see the Church as just a human association dependent upon skill, agreement and goodwill. Priests need detachment — not from human suffering or human delight, but from dependence on human achievement; and good theology offers training in such detachment, prompting us to keep our eyes on the landscape in its full scale, not our inept and uneven cultivation of it. To be a point where lines of force converge and are knitted together, there must be a level of stillness in us that allows this to happen, or at least allows us to see beyond the complicated efforts and political stratagems that we are tempted to invest in the process.

So the priest today needs a faithful and patient commitment in prayer and in work; a sense of the depth of the human heart, in good and ill, a certain three-dimensionality in understanding humanity; a patience with human diversity that is expressed by the willingness to keep looking at the human

face; a familiarity with the face of Jesus that enables him or her to recognise it even when it is hidden; a habit of gratitude and a level of detachment. But all of this relates in one way or another to having a theology worth talking about, a picture of the universe within God's purpose and of Christ as both the agent and the environment of the new creation. Within and beyond all the debates about the detail of theological education and ministerial formation these days, the largest question still remains too often unanswered: what is the shape and unity of the Christian view of creation itself? What is the comprehensive story we tell? This is not a question about having more 'doctrine' in a course, but about how the whole process of ministerial education makes us natives in the landscape into which Jesus has invited us, and gives us some of the tools for celebrating how God has acted to introduce us into this place. We are not called on to give a bit more room to one module among others here, but to see this actual and present world joyfully and consistently in the light of God's being and doing, in the light of the trinitarian life and the incarnation of the Word.

When the vision of God's being and doing has become weak, theology becomes defensive — and so do Christians in general and priests in particular. One of the numerous things which have made Michael Ramsey's writings so liberating for many is the degree to which they are free from defensiveness. 'The God of the Bible is majestic enough', he writes, 'not to require such protection' (p.25) — the protection, in this instance, of an anxious urgency to maintain the literal sense of every inch of scriptural narrative. But he goes on, in words that have a good deal of resonance today, to be equally critical of 'defensive Catholicism' unwilling to take any risks for the sake of unity (p.26): a poignant plea, if you think of his own disappointment over the failure of the Anglican-Methodist negotiations of that era. But somehow or other, we all have to undergo a fairly fundamental conversion from seeing revealed truth as a possession to be guarded to seeing it as a place to inhabit; not one bit of territory that needs protection, but the whole world renewed. We shall not proclaim Christ effectively if we are constantly reverting to what makes us anxious rather than what makes us grateful.

All I have said so far implies that the priest's task is centrally and essentially to proclaim that world renewed — in personal care, in public teaching, in sacramental action. And the point of such proclamation is to tell the assembly of believers who they are in God's presence, what it is to be involved with and in the priestly act of Jesus Christ and what that means in the daily

interactions of human life in terms of reconciliation, judgement, risk and gift. So far, I haven't used the word 'mission' — partly because I think that sometimes we need to clarify the content before we use the actual word. But I hope that what has been said will have some obvious resonance with the challenges that currently stand before the Church in Britain, and that it is a picture that will make sense in the new styles of church life towards which we are undoubtedly moving. An ordained ministry that reminds the Church what it is in terms of its invitation into Christ's place will be an essential aspect of that necessary renewal which takes us beyond the identification of 'Church' with the way we have historically run things. Ironically in the eyes of some, a theology for 'emerging Church' ought to underline the rationale for ordained ministry, Catholic ministry, not to obscure it; because an emerging Church without the recognisable signs and relations embodied in Catholic ministry is in serious danger of lapsing into the mode of a human assembly of those who agree and sympathise with each other. But how Catholic ministry is deployed and resourced becomes an invitingly large question, to which institutions like this one will have a huge amount to contribute.

Pre-eminent among the contributions it should be making is, I believe, an insistence upon the two things that have reappeared consistently throughout these reflections — the human hinterland of priesthood, the enriching of an awareness of complex and diverse experience; and the sense of a landscape, of inhabiting a world that is in all sorts of ways strange and still to be explored but is unmistakably real, including, pervading, the concrete world around.

This means — as for all training institutions, residential above all, but not exclusively so — a stewardship of time that refuses to be pushed into patterns which are dominantly functional, that assumes training to be about growth at least as much as skills and covering a syllabus. For the problems of ordained ministry today have a great deal to do with whether or not the priest can hold together the reality of this world with the reality of Christ's renewing act; and for this we need above all a theology that is alert to the full scope of what the Catholic creeds announce, the mystery of God's threefold life, the ungraspably radical fact of the Word becoming flesh, the fidelity of the Spirit praying Christ in us and into us, and sanctifying what we offer in our powerlessness and unworthiness.

'Today the ordained priest is called to reflect the priesthood of Christ and to serve the priesthood of the people of God, and to be one of the means of grace whereby God enables the Church to be the Church' (Ramsey, p.111).

That is hard to improve on as a summary of what the Church asks of its priests — and it takes us instantly to that deeper question of what God asks of the Church. In this place (Cuddesdon), the Church has asked and not been disappointed; in this place, God's asking has been heard and learned, and from here so many have gone to relay that divine challenge and invitation to the Church. May the years ahead see the same resource and courage go into the formation of our lookouts, our interpreters, our weavers; may the same truthfulness be absorbed and the same landscape become visible as our church — please God — learns how to be itself afresh, and is set free to speak for Christ.

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