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Fear and the Church

My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing. Set your heart right and be steadfast, and do not be impetuous in time of calamity. (Sirach 2:1-2 NRSV)

During the months leading up to my ordination I searched for a bible text that I could carry with me into the years ahead. I wanted something both comforting and inspiring, but the only words which came to me were those I quote at the beginning of this chapter. I also wanted something that would be a constant reminder of the rightness of my calling. But what does such a calling really consist of? And how could I speak of its rightness in the context of a church that is trying to justify its very existence?

The way in which we work out our calling in the context of any public ministry, will not only be difficult and emotionally challenging, but decisive for the future of the church. The call is to prophetic witness, in whatever context it is worked out. Prophetic witness requires vulnerability to God and acceptance of suffering. The biblical prophets, from Moses to John the Baptist, knew God, but they also knew self doubt, rejection, and suffering. So the call to prophetic witness in public ministry will always return us to a place of healthy uncertainty, and with it, healthy fear of God.

As priests, we do not know, for much of the time, why we are doing what we do, what purpose it serves and where it will take us.

If the call is genuine, we will have little material security and few career prospects, because the priesthood is not a career. It is a lifelong commitment to being a servant of God and of his people. In this respect, the church is a "priesthood of all believers". It is God's people, the body of Christ making known his love through the life within it, the life of every one of its people, as each person finds his or her life to be sourced in God. It is the priest's task to help the persons in their care to rediscover that life and, in so doing, to help the church rediscover its true identity and purpose in the world.

Where the church loses its sense of purpose, it resorts to statistics and growth strategies. But the church is often unclear about what it is growing and why anyone should want to be a part of that growth, despite the rising number of people coming forward for ordination in the Church of England.[1] If this trend continues the church will become ever more clerically dominated and, as a result, more creatively constrained. The professionalization of the priesthood does not help people to associate the church with the loving acceptance of all people, as it is modelled by its Founder. Perhaps they feel that they are part of someone else's game plan – which is to fill church buildings on a Sunday morning, so justifying that church's place in the community, or the money raised to maintain the building and the stipends of senior management. Such a diminishing of people's confidence in the church's true identity and purpose feeds on itself, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. It creates a climate of fear, manifested in anxiety about its ongoing viability in a world which is growing ever more distrustful of religion, but which is also fascinated by it.

The climate of distrust is partly due to vague, and sometimes ill-informed, perceptions of what religion is about, the nature of faith itself, and the place and relevance of the institutional church to contemporary Christianity. In other places, where there is outright persecution of Christians, particularly in the Middle East,

[1] The 'Renewal and Reform' programme instigated by the Church of England, looks forward to a 50% increase, by the year 2020, in people coming forward for ordination. *Ministry Division – Stipendiary Clergy Projections* published 2017

Christianity is perceived as a threat to certain extremist elements within Islam and felt by some Muslims to be a challenge to its truth, or integrity. In Syria and parts of Iraq, Christians are the victims of a kind of xenophobia. They are hated because they are different, and they are persecuted because to be different in any kind of totalitarian society, whether secular or religious, is to question, and thereby threaten, the legitimacy of those in power, even when this is not intended. Religion is powerful, but it also poses a threat to those who want power for its own sake.

In the West, the Christian church seldom experiences violent persecution, although there are Christians who imagine they are being persecuted when it is in fact their methods and mores that are being questioned. Nevertheless, religion is highly volatile and therefore frightening for many. Relatively few of Friedrich Schleirmacher's cultured despisers have taken the trouble to understand it, with the result that the smallest religious flame can become a serious fire hazard. The wearing of a cross or hijab in public feels threatening to those who do not understand a person's reasons for doing so, insofar as these are informed by deep love and reverence for God. On the other hand, how is anyone to know that reverence and love for God are the reasons for a public display of a person's religious affiliations?

This week, for example, during the rush hour in a crowded London tube train, a man who was loudly reading scripture passages about fear and death caused immediate alarm. The frightened passengers, desperate to get out, forced open the doors while the train was in a tunnel. The man, though eccentric, could have been assumed to be acting in good faith, and so have caused no more than a degree of embarrassment, were it not for the fact that only a week before, a bomb, planted by an ISIS supporter, had partially exploded in a train at a similar time. For the passengers, the two incidents were of a piece.

The general unease which many people experience in regard to religion suggests that the church has important work to do through

its teaching and preaching ministry. But is the institutional church, with all its injustices and insecurities, equipped to speak into the secular world's fear of religion?

THE CHURCH AS ORGANIZATION

For anyone coming to church for the first time, the impression received is often one of underlying insecurity and defensiveness, similar to that of any struggling organization. They will encounter it in a staunch defence of the *status quo*, or in an equally defensive sectarian mentality. These two attitudes combine to make christians, in their separate churchmanships, feel that they need to close ranks and protect what they stand for, whether this is a conservative evangelical approach to the bible, and to issues of gender and sexuality in particular, or an equally conservative Catholic view of doctrine and the place of human freedom within what it teaches. Liberals have their own version of collective anxiety. They are often haunted by uncertainty arising from a lack of confidence in what they are called to be as people of faith who are also liberals, with the result that they can become fixated on single issues that have a broad secular appeal.

All of this suggests that religious people are not always confident about their place and purpose in the world. The institutional church is, on the whole, in denial about this, so it resorts to various forms of activism and a managerial approach to its shared life. But good management involves two principal factors; a clear vision of what the organization is about, and the care of its own people. While much of its best work may involve caring for those who suffer, my own experience of the church, and it is shared by many clergy, is that it often fails to care for its own. People work better and harder when they know their gifts are valued and that they themselves matter, so a good organization will have the care of those whom it employs as one of its highest priorities.

I have heard many stories of poor pastoring in this respect. One of these concerned the faithful priest who served his diocese
and parish for over thirty years and, on the eve of his retirement,

was told by the diocesan office not to forget to return the key to his house as he left. Nothing more by way of gratitude for what he had contributed to the life of the church seems to have been offered. Others who, for whatever reason, do not fit perfectly into a diocese's current strategy or growth plan, are simply discarded and then ignored when they either press for change or retire. Sometimes, the latter comes as the inevitable consequence of the former.

While the two situations which I have just described usually pertain to older clergy, there have been, in my own time as an ordained person, numerous incidents of strategic management which ignore the particular gifts which people who come forward to serve as priests bring to the task. The priority seems to be that people should fit, or be willing to adapt to, the organization. This reluctance to engage more creatively with gift and with religion itself, including its own, is a major contributing factor to the church's decline.[2]

All that I have said so far suggests that an increasingly systemized church is in danger of losing sight of what the church is for and the purpose of both priesthood and ministry. I make a distinction between the two because priesthood and ministry are not necessarily of a piece.[3] Although we have come to accept that these terms are interchangeable, they are at best complementary. Ministry ought to be the business of those called and tasked to manage and administer the practical and financial aspects of the church's life and to keep it in good running order. They are called to ad-minister. It is a vocation in itself and one which could well be fulfilled by people who have experience of running secular organizations. These people could be ordained or lay, and possibly in active retirement. They should be paid.

The call to the priesthood is quite different, but it is not superior. Neither is it the peculiar domain of those who are especially "spiritual", but it does require people who are willing to be completely given over to the worship of God and to the service of his people in and through their life in Christ.

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[2] Roberts, 'A Postmodern Church? Some Preliminary Reflections on Ecclesiology and Social Theory' in *Essentials of Christian Community*, p.192

[3] Ross, *Pillars of Flame*, ch.2

Priests will be people with specific gifts, not all of which fit the traditional model. These people do not necessarily bring managerial skills. They bring the best of their true selves. That is to say, that such people will have been honed by life to the point where compassion, intellectual rigor (which does not necessarily imply academic excellence) come together to shape a person who is truly wise. The church needs to value such people and allow them to deploy their gifts to the maximum effect, without imposing unnecessary bureaucratic restraints on them. Their gifts shape the church's vision for the world.

AUTHORITY, LEADERSHIP AND THE SYSTEM

It follows that those who are called to lead the church, or who are involved in the selection and training of future priests, as well as of those offering to serve in non-ordained capacities, must know how to discern gift. The discernment and honoring of gift involves taking risks. Allowing the Holy Spirit freedom of movement in the selection process, by focusing on gift rather than skill, will eventually lead to the selection of a certain kind of person. Such a person will probably not see their priestly ministry as a career, and this gives them immense freedom. Therein lies the risk, both to them and to the system.

Furthermore, their understanding of the priesthood, and of all public ministry, means that he or she may not necessarily understand canonical obedience as being simply a matter of doing what one is told to do by whoever is in charge. They will be thinking of obedience in collegial terms, taking responsibility for the service of God's people alongside those in authority. The deployment of priestly gift is not about ticking organizational boxes. It is a matter of deploying a priest or lay minister to a serving context which will benefit from the gifts they bring.

The parish system of the Church of England provided the original matrix for defining and administering society. It had the advantage of being both large enough to support a church and a priest on a frugal stipend, but small enough for people to identify

with that particular church. Over the centuries it would become not only iconic, but a marking point for significant transitions in the life of the individual, so reinforcing that person's sense of belonging to the nation through its religion. Today, the parish system is valuable insofar as it enables the priest to serve God's people and to know them personally, so that she can be as Christ to them in times of plenty as well as in times of need. But where a parish is too large, as is often the case in rural areas, because it has been amalgamated with others, or where the population is more transient, parish priests find it hard to serve the people from within their life of prayer and with the particular gifts they are given. Distance defeats them, and so does an overloaded schedule. The administrative duties with which they are increasingly burdened, and the relentless demands of parish life, make deep and sustained prayer increasingly difficult. Through no fault of their own, they have little or no available time and, as a result, little or no available inner space in which to renew their strength in God and pray deeply for his people.

As a result of this double constraint, prayer itself is in danger of becoming meaningless, or even counter-productive, especially when the person praying slips into anxiety mode. When we are anxious we move away from God and further into ourselves, rather than letting go of ourselves and dropping further into God.

When we forget to drop into God, we come away from prayer feeling more drained and anxious than when we began. Added to this, long hours and inadequate time management lead to spiritual as well as physical exhaustion and, in many cases, clinical depression. Good pastoral mentoring, or what a secular organization would call line management, is therefore essential for all who are called to the service of the church, whether ordained or lay. Caring for these people, especially the ordained, is the primary calling of bishops.

Bishops are to be pastors and people of prayer. The ordinal states that it is their duty to "watch over and pray for all those committed to their charge… to know their people and to be

known by them."[4] They are also called to "maintain and further the unity of the church." Unity is a matter of collegiality, of mutual dedication to the task. It is not about being seen to stay together despite the deeply divisive issues which make union in Christ virtually impossible.

Taken together, these two callings, the call to prayer and the call to pastor, reflect the relationship with Christ which all church leaders, whether or not they are bishops, should live out in the context of their particular priesthood. Unity, whether visible or not, consists in taking responsibility for others in Christ at the deepest level of our individual and collective consciousness. It does not always entail agreement although it does oblige everyone to confront prejudice and injustice in whatever contexts they appear.

Taking responsibility means holding those we serve in the love of Christ so that we can meet and serve them from within this deeper place of covenantal encounter with God. Such an encounter ought to reflect trust, trust being the antidote to fear. In the life of the church fear manifests itself chiefly in suspicion of others, in finding others threatening. Finding people threatening is a sign of a person or group's own insecurity. Insecurity, and perceiving others as threatening, makes it impossible to establish genuine relatedness, the kind of relatedness which is effected in and through Christ and which is the fruit of his own relationship with the Father. All who have the care of others in Christ's church, are called to pray for God's people from this place of mutual encounter, deep relatedness, and of complete one-ness with God in Christ. Ultimately, there is no ontological separation between us and Christ, no difference of being.

Breaking down the barriers of difference which exist between human beings is both the nature and purpose of the authority

[4] This is a paraphrase (in order to maintain gender neutrality) of the Ordinal as given in the *Alternative Service Book 1980*

given to Jesus by the Father. It is the essence of the healing which precedes forgiveness and it will be mirrored in the way church leaders exercise their own authority. It therefore requires that a bishop be in a position to centre her life in Christ, bringing with her all those whom she is privileged to serve as a healer and mediator of forgiveness. Taking responsibility for the many in this way will inform her dealings with individuals and the manner in which she is able to resolve pastoral difficulties in her diocese. She cannot be a pastoral bishop while at the same time functioning as the CEO of an organization.

Bishops, and an increasing number of clergy, are expected to simultaneously model two entirely different modes of exercising authority. On the one hand, in the case of bishops, they must function as the CEO of a large organization and, on the other, as religious autocrats exercising unequivocal monastic authority over their clergy. This dual role raises problems in two areas. It not only throws into question the nature of episcopal authority itself, as it should be exercised in the church of today, but also places considerable strain on both bishops and clergy in regard to the concept of canonical obedience.

Monastic authority in, for example, the Benedictine tradition, was never autocratic. The youngest would always speak first in meetings where important decisions were made, so allowing for humility and wisdom to inform the way a community was led and governed by its abbot. If the bishop is to be viewed as a monastic figure demanding unquestioning obedience, this already distances him or her from the collegial and consensual authority model of the Benedictine monastic tradition, to which the episcopacy is broadly referenced.

With the demand for unquestioning obedience comes loneliness, both for those in authority and for those who are subject to it. The bishop is immediately isolated by the mutual distrust and anxiety engendered by this situation while clergy, who are on the whole not rebellious by nature, feel increasingly panicked by the lack of space for real dialogue and pastoral empathy to which such a situation also gives rise. Furthermore, the bishop's dual role, as

CEO and abbot dictator figure, undermines his confidence and may even lead to some kind of identity crisis. When should he be "boss"? In what situation, should he be "abbot"? When, if ever, can he be simply wise? The status paraphernalia which surrounds the most senior clerical posts does not help those who hold them to make such decisions.

THE COMPETITIVE DRIVE – STATUS ANXIETY

Given these opposing roles, bishops are challenged on two levels. On the one hand, they are vulnerable to being seduced by the outward trappings of their position and the superficial prestige which these bring. This in turn will lead to anxiety about maintaining their public *figura*, or the self-confidence they need to maintain credibility in the post they are occupying.[5] On the other hand, and at the same time, they are constantly having to verify that their real self still exists, that they have retained their authenticity and personal integrity.

Women bishops, as well as men, inherit both these areas of non-creative anxiety. Sometimes, they are difficult to hold together, with one inevitably giving way to the other. Anxiety about status is acute among women who aspire to high office in the church, with the result that they are often perceived as "pushy" and no less ambitious than their male colleagues. As with men, they too acquire a second personality, the outward *figura* of the successful or aspiring cleric, which often obscures the true self, known by those who are close to them, and which is honored by God. Added to this, is the anxiety which comes with having to prove their worth as women in a male dominated power structure.

As in all life situations, the worth of both men and women in the church is gauged by what they do and by how popular they are. As a result, what we are worth amounts, in our own eyes, to how much we are loved.[6] Even today, women have to work harder

[5] The Italian word, *figura*, signifies "outward appearance", or how we show ourselves to the world.

[6] de Botton, *Status Anxiety*, p.108

in order to be noticed and judged as worthy, and thereby loveable. Even today, an opening conversational gambit involving a couple will begin with the man being asked what his profession is while the woman is ignored. Women are often still only barely visible in social contexts.

Taken together, these manifestations of status anxiety, in both women and men, make the church increasingly introspective and competitive. It is concerned about its viability and survival and, as a result of the *figura* which this collective anxiety creates and projects into the world, it is reduced to having to compete with the world on the world's terms. It becomes an organization like any other, competing for customers on the high street. Underlying much of what passes for mission is the need to increase the numbers of people coming to church, in order for a church to justify its existence.

Seen in this light, the drive for church growth becomes a manifestation of the fear of no longer being "relevant". It is also a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fear of irrelevance, and the need to be seen to be successful, lead to increasing irrelevance, because the purpose of the church is to offer something which bears no relation to success or status. The church is called to be counter-cultural. Its good news speaks of a different kind of status and worth, one which pertains to the unnoticed and excluded. Striving to be a "successful" church therefore makes for a situation which is theologically and spiritually contradictory, counter-productive and self-defeating. Anxious activism is self-defeating because it destroys the church's inner life, as it destroys the inner life of anyone who seeks God for his own sake but is defeated by the need to achieve and be productive rather than fruitful. Activism, and the anxiety about relevance which prompts it, inhibits the church's fruit-bearing potential.

The church is not called to be relevant but to "stand" in the life of the Spirit, and in the strength of the cross. The Greek word for the cross derives from the word *histemi*, which means to "stand" or "straighten". The church is called to "stand" in the face of materialism and of every kind of de-humanizing prejudice. It is called to bear fruit from this rich place

of witness and of waiting on God, but it is often too busy, and even too "successful", to have either the time or the spiritual resources needed to bear this kind of fruit. As a result, it often fails those who may want to return to the faith of their early years.

Those wanting to return to church will be looking for evidence of holiness. They will hope to find it in the way people welcome and value them for who they are when they first visit their local church, rather than for what tasks they could potentially undertake in its day to day running and maintenance. They will also be looking for the wisdom which informs a theology suited to where they have reached on life's journey.

The church rightly invests much time, money, and energy on young people, but there is a large section of the population which is not so young and which is not being served, either pastorally or theologically. As a result, many people who come to church, or return to it later in life, feel under-valued and even unwanted.

The pressure of status anxiety, as it is linked to relevance and the need to be seen to be a successful church, not only makes for introspection among clergy and bishops, it also fosters anxiety among those who look to the church as a locus of encounter with God. People over the age of 35 are often seeking a safe space in which to make sense of their lives, and perhaps come to terms with loss and grief, either privately in prayer, or in the context of a small supportive community praying around them, but without overwhelming them.

The church is a worshipping community. Its primary purpose is to be a house of prayer. This is its core identity. It is not a group of individuals coming together for a brief moment of respite from ordinary life, although it does afford this too. It is persons coming together as God's people. Being God's people is not tribal religion. It is about owning our shared need for God which, in the context of public worship, becomes the expression of mutual love between God and every human being. The church is called to embody that love in its practical life and in its worship. The life that is shaped

by that worship will have a transformative effect not only on the community itself, but on all those with whom they have dealings in their own individual lives.

The quality or truthfulness of worship is not defined by style or liturgical preference, or by the large numbers of people coming to any one church. Christian worship is a confident response to the presence of God, in a particular space, and in the company of other people, whether many or few. Neither is worship limited to the manner or extent a person does or does not embrace key doctrines. To impose acceptance of specific teachings as a condition for welcoming someone to a worshipping community alienates those with reservations about coming to church at all. Such membership conditions confine the Holy Spirit to a set theological agenda and to *a priori* assumptions about what it means to be church.

Holding on to personal or institutional power in any aspect of church leadership also confines the Holy Spirit. The leader's personal insecurity can obstruct people's view of Jesus. Confining the Holy Spirit in this way is one of the few sins which Jesus condemned outright (Mark 3:28-30). The remark is addressed directly to powerful Pharisees, who were the religious elite, in response to their accusation that Jesus was possessed of an evil spirit. They knew this to be untrue, but he was a threat to their authority and to the power they themselves exercised over other people.

To sin against the Holy Spirit, especially in the context of leading worship, is to assume a power which belongs to God. We see this happening when worship is dominated by a single individual and his or her personal hold on a congregation. We see it when reverence for God, expressed through liturgy and liturgical drama, is reduced to narcissistic aestheticism. We sense it in preaching that either insults people's intelligence, and is often driven by a manipulative spiritual agenda, or is an exercise in intellectual showmanship. None of these connect people to God or lead them to genuine worship.

DEEP TRUTH

Decline in church attendance, as it pertains to the loss of a sense of religious identity, is perhaps also due to a collective inner blindness on the part of secular society in regard to faith and the nature of salvation itself. Much of the time, discussions about faith dwell on God's apparent absence from what is going on in the world and in people's lives, rather than with questions pertaining to his objective existence, although the two very often go together.

Inner blindness to spiritual realities limits our grasp of those important realities which lie outside the material and "provable". Yesterday, for example, the Guardian newspaper revealed the recent authentication of Leonardo de Vinci's painting Salvador Mundi. It is valued in millions, having originally sold in the 1950's for £45. What is remarkable about the picture, as it is portrayed in the newspaper, is the kind of response it elicits at its first viewing. There are banks of photographers, as well as people pointing their smart phones in its direction. Museum guards flank the picture on either side, their faces expressionless. There is a sense of hunger, but it is not the hunger of faith. It is about "seeing" but failing to "perceive" God in the moment, while at the same time hungering for him in his apparent absence.

In his book *Riddley Walker*, Russell Hoban speaks of the "first knowing" which the world lost when "the cleverness" overpowered it.[7] The first knowing might be compared to hunger for God and the innate sense of God's presence, the "perceiving" of him which prompts worship. Hoban is referring to the kind of "cleverness" which could destroy our planet with a nuclear bomb, but there is another "cleverness", as dangerous to human flourishing as the one Hoban describes. It is the cynicism, or fear, which causes us to deny the deep truth, the "first knowing" in which we live and move and have our being, and in which we are at one with the essential being of God.

The apparent indifference to the deep truth of the Leonardo painting is a sign of the fear that grips us when we contemplate,

[7] See ch.1

not the existence of God, but his essential "being". In dropping into the "being of God, we experience, over time, the terrible paradox of his absence from the wilderness of our material existence, an absence which is both the cause and the effect of the commodification of the holy – a painting of the Saviour which fetches millions of dollars, for example. The church's meaning and purpose lies in returning us to our original holiness, so that we can re-discover our life's true purpose in the "being" of God.