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Ordained Ministry in Babylon

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The parallels between historic “Babylon” and present day life in Western Europe have been perceptively drawn out by Tom Stuckey. Babylon was impressive in terms of progressive architecture, trade, affluence and secular culture. The longer the Israelites were captive there and accommodated to the life style, the more the memory and the dream of their culture and calling could fade. Ministry in their midst needed to represent a counter culture of dreams and hopes while being realistic as they related to everyday life around them.

In this challenging situation Tom warns about the dangers of adopting an “heroic” style of ministry which can be deflating and exhausting. His example is the dramatic demonstration of God’s power effected by Elijah’s prayer on Mt Carmel when his altar bonfire burst into flames. This episode ended with him in flight across the desert showing all the signs of depression and loneliness. His demo had a temporary effect but the altar fire gave him psychological after-burn and burn out. These are symptoms that can easily creep up on overstretched ministers trying to relate to people caught up in a culture of populism. I sometimes wonder where ‘dramatic’ ministers get their model of leadership from and suspect their bright



appealing approach is partly derived from panel game presenters on television. On the positive side this style does relate to public expectations today but not all ministers are cut out for this as many are naturally introspective rather than demonstrative and putting on a show as a regular feature can be a strain!

All this raises the question to what extent should those leading services allow their personalities to shine through as part of their communication? At worst too much show of personality can detract from the message and be off-putting because of the showbiz element involved. At best, God allows personality to shine through to captivate and hold attention while still allowing the familiar words of the service to speak for themselves. We need some gifted “eccentrics” (differently gifted people) in ministry. Methodism can squash individuality if we are not careful. However, everyday ministry cannot all be fresh / creative / prophetic for this can lead to burnt out imagination. Ordained ministers are called to use and refresh Christian culture

so that the story is enacted through the year with a persistent clarity that does not give in to a world obsessed with novelty. Christian culture needs careful nurture through these challenging days when we relate to and use the technological revolution without losing sight of the ongoing Christian revolution. Ministers are custodians of the time honoured culture which embodies the truth we share.

Ministry in Babylon involves inter-generational work so that the dreams and memories of the elderly can help to inform and shape the longings of the young. Although each minister will have distinctive gifts and interests these need to relate to real people who are known, valued and enjoyed. Tom writes passionately about the role of the ordained person as essentially pastoral and refers to Prof. Gordon Rupp who was my tutor at Manchester University. In his Presidential address in 1965 Rupp suggested that the survival of God's people depended on the effectiveness of the pastor. He embraced humility and delighted in being the assistant pianist in the primary department at his local church. The huge change in the style of ministry that I have observed is that some "pastors" really do not know their people. This may be a sweeping generalisation for which I apologise as there are wonderful exceptions, but it is my real perception.

Like all of us I fully appreciate all the time and energy that has gone into the delicate business of creating larger circuits, the demands of legislation in terms of health and safety, safeguarding and data protection. I heartily approve the switch to outgoing mission as a leading emphasis BUT pastoral relationships are necessary to tune our mission and make preaching relevant. It is a matter of shared teamwork within the church but if the ordained minister only turns up in emergency situations without the previous groundwork of getting to know the people concerned this can be of less value all round. God is personal and this needs to be expressed. Mission relates to the real needs of real people. In Babylon they wept together in the water meadows.

Personally signing hundred of Class Tickets every three months used to be a sacred chore but the minister pictured the people named and prayed for them and ended with a list of visits to those with special needs. Nowadays tickets can bear a signature stamp or the signature of a church secretary or are no longer used by local churches. The personal touch seems to be in retreat.

I welcome a renewed emphasis on people telling their story of encounter with God by way of straightforward testimony. Various attempts over the years to encourage

supernaturally-natural talk of God, with the use of study courses in house groups and elsewhere, have often seem to result in just talking-about-talking-about-God. I have experienced wonderful God-given moments at our local heritage site at Tolpuddle, when visitors to the chapel and historic display ask direct questions like “What is a Christian” and “What do Methodists believe?” We need to be ready for these questions when they come and for the disarmingly direct questions of children. A child of seven recently asked me “Who made God?” What really counts is when we learn to listen and speak careful words of genuineness out of personal silence. This has a special quality and finds its target. Ministers in Babylon need to be able to listen, reflect, go deep and then speak with a disarming simplicity.

A trend in modern preaching to gain a hearing is a winsome emphasis of self-fulfilment. Jesus sounded this note when he said that he had come to bring life in fullness. Yet self-fulfilment (finding who I am meant to be as a unique creation of God) is different in kind from self-indulgence and retail therapy. “Happiness” is not a true translation of the declarations of “blessedness” Jesus speaks in the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. I suggest, as Tom does, that self-fulfilment comes with self-giving; giving yourself in sacrificial service enables you to find who you really are.

Those who were ready to return from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem from rubble were those who were willing to give up the comforts of the progressive city for the greater good - a new life of faith emerging from the ruins. I suggest that there are still persistent rumours of God among our ruins and people will want to look beyond secular materialism to find meaning. As Philip Larkin concluded in his poem “Church Going”, people will discover within themselves a “hunger ...to be more serious” when they gravitate to holy ruins. May we have the listening silence and the right words ready at that moment of the turning tide.

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