

Repairing Altars of Sacrifice

Tom Stuckey

Abstract

Is Elijah a suitable role model for an ordained minister in today's declining Church? This paper suggests that the ordained should adopt the kenotic ministerial pattern of Paul as found in his letter to the Philippians rather than the power model of Elijah. In a secular context such as ours, it is also important that the ordained minister listens to the faith stories of the elderly in the local congregations. Their memories, when redeemed, can stimulate and open up imaginative options for the future.

Keywords: Amnesia; Clergy Stress; Methodism; Remembering; Partnership; Authority; Remnant; Sacrificial Ministry.

Introduction

Justin Lewis-Anthony, in a book with the intriguing title *If you Meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him*, attempts a radical re-think of traditional priestly ministry.¹ He argues that Herbert set the pattern of clergy activity right up to the 1950s. This model if still pursued today demoralizes and causes burn out. Although Lewis-Anthony offers three imaginative models of priest as *witness*, *watchman* and *weaver* he has not given us a radical model. He has simply re-painted and moved the furniture. His conclusions left me feeling weary and uninspired.

Manic Ministry Yesterday

The story of the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) is the Biblical propaganda story behind this paper. Unlike the Baal prophets who were functionaries of an institution – royal for them rather than ecclesiastical – Elijah's approach is radical. According to Walter Brueggemann, he gives voice to a subversive narrative of 'hurt and amazement'.² Is Elijah the ministerial model for today?

Let us indulge in an imaginative fantasy. Elijah begins the day by preaching a sermon on 'How long will you hop about from one leg to the other?' His congregation are unresponsive. After a morning of conflict mismanagement, there is

¹ Justin Lewis-Anthony, *If you Meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him: Radically Re-thinking Priestly Ministry* (Woonsocket: Mowbray, 2009).

² Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p.30.

a property matter requiring attention: a ruined altar to be repaired. The afternoon begins with presentation and praying. He then gets rid of his opponents, climbs a mountain, and prays for rain; this time his prayer is not so easily answered. The day ends with him running 17 miles to Jezreel and galloping so fast that he overtakes Ahab's chariot. It was a busy day. Elijah is no less active than a modern minister. The next day he has a nervous breakdown! All the stress indicators are there; the fear the flight, the abandoning of his companion, his lack of appetite, his paranoia - 'they seek my life to take it away,' - and his whining self-pity, 'I am no better than my ancestors' (1 Kings 19.4). Yvonne Warren in her survey of Anglican clergy in two dioceses makes an illuminating comment:

'Guilt is often a major preoccupation for clergy. They feel that they have 'let God down' ... and that they can 'never get it right' or do enough.'³

Elijah is no more a ministerial model for us than the prophets of Baal. He too succumbs to ministerial madness. His journey to Mount Horeb and cringing withdrawal into a cave is a symptom of regression. Moreover, even after an incredible theophany the same pathetic words (v. 10 & v14) tumble from his mouth. Did God's appearance mean nothing? He received instructions from God but did he actually anoint Jehu as king or look to the 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal? His model of ministry is distorted by his own egocentricity.

John the Baptist was regarded as a reincarnation of Elijah. In an Elijah post-Carmel type of depression he questions the validity of his own ministry. Elijah was encouraged to ponder the significance of the 7,000 persons of faith. John is reminded of the prophetic promises of the past and the present activity of Jesus. John, according to Jesus was the greatest of all the prophets of the past, yet in the kingdom of God he is the least (Lk 7.28). Have we the suggestion that the Kingdom of God is not reliant on impressive John or Elijah type ministries? If so it follows that the future of the Church is more likely to rest with those who live under the shadow of the cross rather than with those who keep the institution alive or exercise a flamboyant ministry of glory. God was revealed to Elijah not in the earthquake, wind and fire but in 'a sound of sheer silence' (1 Kings 19.12).

Theology and Authority

The letter to the Philippians, once described as 'a document on martyrdom', has a theological perspective of 'cross' rather than 'glory'.⁴ The letter celebrates the joyful relationship that Paul has with the church because of their partnership in suffering. He makes many references to 'mind' (Philippians 1.7, 2.2, 3.15, 3.19, 4.2). This is not simply an exhortation to be humble but of the necessity of being inhabited by the mind of Christ through sacrificial obedience to him.

In my address to the Methodist Conference in 2005 I said:

³ Yvonne Warren, *The Cracked Pot: The State of Today's Anglican Parish Clergy* (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2002), p.54.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians: Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), p.34.

‘Structures, priorities and plans enable but they do not give life. Only the word of God and the Holy Spirit can energise and empower.’⁵

Sadly Methodism has still not learnt this lesson as it engages in yet another round of ‘restructuring’. Waiting on the Spirit locally and engaging more deeply in theology is the key to a future. My book *On the Edge of Pentecost*, published in 2007 following my time as President, set out my belief that every church member is a ‘theologian’. The book was written to encourage members to reflect on their own ‘life story’ so as to discern the presence of God within it. When the connexion between the Word of God and one’s life experience is recognised, story becomes theology and theology testimony and testimony releases energy, vitality and faith. In the words of Martin Luther: ‘not reading books or speculating, but living dying and being damned makes you a theologian.’⁶

Jesus spoke with authority and not as the scribes (Mk.1.22). The Greek word for authority ‘exousia’ comes from the verb ‘exesti’, which means ‘it is possible’ and ‘it is permitted’. It describes power but has a different take on it. ‘Exousia’ is not about a person’s status, position or authority within a structure, or an ability to coerce, manipulate or control. The scribes and the prophets of Baal operated with this sort of power. ‘Exousia’ is a gift of grace centred not on the person but on God who inhabits and exercises ‘possibility’ within that person. Elijah operated with this sort of power. It is significant that to precipitate the release of fire, Elijah took up the twelve stones that had been discarded and used them to ‘repair’ the altar of sacrifice. The root of both Hebrew verbs ‘repair’ and ‘build’ is the same. The word *rapha* translates as ‘to heal’. New dimensions of ‘possibility’ can therefore arise from the healing of past memories.

Back to the Future

Brueggemann highlights the importance of memory.⁷ He describes memory as a magnet that pulls the people of God back into the past in order to stimulate prophetic imagination in the present. According to him, ‘only memory allows possibility’.⁸ This suggests that a church suffering from amnesia may not have future. Elijah’s post-Carmel journey can be interpreted as something other than regression. Mount Horeb was believed to be the place where Moses received the Law. Was Elijah journeying backwards in order to claim the future?

The wisdom of the past has little place in a post-modern culture governed by technocrats and managers. Erosion of memory is inevitable in a fast moving society open to instant and universal communication. Those in the higher levels of leadership can suffer most from amnesia. They are bombarded daily with problems demanding an immediate pragmatic response yet these are the very people

⁵ Tom Stuckey, *On the Edge of Pentecost: A Theological Journey of Transformation* (Peterborough: UK Inspire, 2007), p.5.

⁶ Gordon Rupp, *The Old Reformation and the New*, (Epworth Press, 1967), p.15.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenantal Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p.23 and p.27.

⁸ Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1986), p.89.

responsible for shaping the future. Brueggemann comments on the people of God living in a secular Babylonian culture (like ours), stating that when 'we forgot our past we absolutize the present[...] and want nothing more than the best of today.'⁹ I consider an ecclesiastical institution with a Connexional system (like Methodism) to be an easier prey to the encroachment of secularism than, say, the more 'independent churches' or the Cathedrals.

Where is memory lodged in Methodism? We must look not to Conference nor to those who supposedly lead us but to those grey-headed members who sit in our pews. This is necessary because they carry the DNA of Methodism in their stories and life experience. They are our equivalent to Elijah's 'seven thousand in Israel' (1 Kings 19.18). Here memory together with theological reflection can stimulate prophetic imagination and release possibility.

Energy will arise in a local church, not when the minister attempts a contemporary reinterpretation of Wesley's ministry but when local congregations turn to Wesley's hymns and sing theology into their souls. Similarly Anglican priests and people will not be given energy by following an update of George Herbert's model of ministry instead they should read and digest his poetry. Hymns and the poetry are expressions of the grace and generosity of God. Ministers and priests come to remind us of grace yet so often end up operating 'under law' because of the multifarious demands made upon them in maintaining the institution. They are trapped and trap others into an exhausting cycle of meetings and demands.

Remembrance

The memories of grey-headed congregations are often shaped by a desire to 'go back to the good old days'.¹⁰ Although these memories are a mixture of nostalgic fact and fiction, they are a grass root source of prophetic revelation. While they testify to present bewilderment they are also witness to the faith that has sustained them and which they believe must be kept alive today. These broken memories are like the stones of the altar that Elijah repaired.

Ask congregational members to name those preachers in the past who inspired them. Ask them to name the persons responsible for bringing them into the church. Ask about events that inspired them to become Christians. The recital of such names and events will warm their hearts but also bring sadness to their eyes. Unfortunately pastoral care has been reduced to crisis visiting. There is little time for listening to such stories let alone allowing the Spirit to release energy from their remembrance.

Richmond College was founded in 1842 as a Methodism Missionary College. Fixed to the walls of its lofty entrance hall were memorial boards listing the names of those who served in other lands and died 'in the field.' The list of those who went to West Africa is particularly poignant. Missionary after missionary died about three weeks after landing. If they survived 'seasoning fever' they might live for a year or so. The tradition of the college, my college, was that on hearing of a death, one of the students present would offer to fill the gap. Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood before these

⁹ Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, p.102.

¹⁰ Malcolm Grundy, *Multi-Congregation Ministry; Theology and Practice in a Changing Church*, (Canterbury Press, 2015), p.31-33.

boards in wonder. He used this tradition to rally the pastors in Germany in their struggle against the state, telling them 'I am not asking you to do or suffer anything new'.¹¹

These boards now hang on the walls of Church House in Marylebone Road. No one should become a minister or an employee of the Methodist Church until they have stood before them and absorbed the spirit of Methodism and recognise that 'only memory allows possibility'. Our future lies not only in the remembrance of such sacrificial service but in the remembrance of those nameless saints who today quietly work behind the scenes of our local churches. They are Elijah's seven thousand. They, and not a contemporary set of Elijahs, can heal the church and safeguard the future as they make their sacrifice complete.

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¹¹ Alan Birtwhistle, 'Methodist Missions' found in Davies, George and Rupp (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Vol.3* (Epworth, 1983), p.19.

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