

A Kingdom of Priests?

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As the book of Exodus tells it, when the People of God was formed out of liberated slaves from Egypt (a kind of early Liberia), Aaron and his sons were made the first priests of the new community. Like all the peoples around them the Hebrews took it for granted that a real established society needed a priesthood, just as we take it for granted that a society needs some kind of civil service or some kind of school system. Aaron was the first high priest of the children of Israel, he had a job, an important job, within that community. The priest's job was to arrange the transactions with the gods of the community, to ensure that the gods did not become hostile, for this could be disastrous for the people. The priest had to find out what the gods wanted and arrange for the people to give it to them. So he stood as mediator, on the frontier, looking both ways, to the gods and to the people; communicating to the people the messages of the gods, communicating to the gods the offerings of the people.

But, of course, the Children of Israel were no ordinary society, they were something unique in human history; they made a gradual but huge revolution from which all subsequent humankind has benefited and (as with all revolutions) suffered too. For by the time the Book of Exodus was put together it was becoming clear that their God was *not* one (or more) of the gods, and this was going to make a difference to what such things as priesthood meant. They were a people who were not to have *any* gods, they were to deal only with one who says: 'all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. The only one they can call 'God' (and they are very reluctant to call him anything at all) is not the national god of Israel but the maker and owner of the whole earth. Most people, of course, had some story about the god who made the whole world, but the gods they actually worshipped and spent money on were more immediate ones who were needed for keeping the crops growing and the soldiers successful. Israel was to do without this assistance, and worship only the God of the universe.

So already in the Book of Exodus you get the idea that Israel does not just *contain* a number of priests, like the other nations round about, but that *as a whole nation* she is priest of the God of the universe. Like any priest she mediates between God and the people, but in the case of this priestly nation the God is the God of all the world and the people are the people of all the world. Israel as a whole community is priest for

humankind, communicating to us the commands of God, bringing to God our prayers and offerings of praise and thanksgiving.

Of course it took some time for all this to sink in; its full implications were not, I suppose, recognised until much later, after the return of the Jews from exile. But in, for example, the later poems in the Book of Isaiah it is explicit. The God they worship is creator of all that is and in his plan the Jews are to be the priest mediating between this creator and his human creatures. This was his plan for the Jews, and in the fulfilment of that plan something strange happened. Just as the notion of priest had moved from the individual priests, Aaron and his successors, to the communal priesthood of the nation as a whole, so when the plan came to fulfilment the reverse happened. It turned out that the priesthood of the Jews was preparing for and culminated in one man, Jesus of Nazareth; he was himself the fulfilment of the hope of Israel. He himself was the point towards which the history of the people of God had been moving, in him the Jewish revolution came to a head. In him was the union of the God of the universe and humankind. As the Letter to the Hebrews tells it, then the last vestiges of any national priesthood, the priesthood of Aaron, have become finally irrelevant; not for nothing has the Temple been destroyed. A momentous change has taken place.

There was then, almost immediately, a tragic schism in the people of God between those who saw the momentous change as primarily the destruction of the Temple, and those who saw it primarily as the death and resurrection of Jesus; and until that first and worst schism between what we now call Jews and Christians is somehow healed neither of us will be whole. But, in the meantime, neither Jews nor Christians have a priesthood. The Jews indeed have rabbis to interpret the Law but they are not priests. We Christians have supervisors and elders (that is what our words 'bishop' and 'priest' originally meant) but they are not priests in the sense that either Aaron or the whole people of Israel were priest. For us Christians, the only priest in that sense is the one who was priest in the fullest and final sense, Jesus of Nazareth. He is 'the one mediator between God and humankind' — Jesus Christ. He is the only priest as he is the only king, as his sacrifice is the only sacrifice. All priesthood, kingship and sacrifice for the God of the universe have found their real meaning only in this man. What an extraordinary and paradoxical thing this is. The shocking thing that Christians are saying is that everything meant by priesthood, kingship and sacrifice was nothing religious at all, nothing liturgical, ceremonial at all. It was all really about the execution of a falsely convicted criminal, an ordinary squalid miscarriage of justice.

We Christians say that when we look for kingship, for judgement and power, we see only the one who is judged and punished; if we look for the sacrificing priest we see only the victim who is bleeding to death and dying of thirst and cramps hanging from a cross; if we look for sacrifice we see only a judicial murder. If we look for mystical union with the creator of the universe we see only the dying victim of our world, the

representative of *all* the victims, the victims of the kings and priests, the victims of each other. This one individual man is our only priest; and yet in meditating on the meaning of this, the early Christians made a new kind of move back from the individual to the whole community again, for they saw the whole community of believers as sharing in the priestly mission of Christ. We find St Peter's first epistle re-echoing and giving new meaning to the words of Exodus: 'you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation'; but now we are 'a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices to God *through Jesus Christ*'. Once more, like our fathers, the children of Israel, we are, as a community, priests for the whole of humankind before the God of the universe—to bring God to the world and the world to God.

This is the priesthood to which we are dedicated by our baptism; you might say we are condemned to it by our baptism for baptism is a kind of sentence of death. The people of Israel, hearing that they were a royal priesthood, may have had fancies of conquering the world for God, bringing it into submission to the creator; but we know that our priesthood is that of Christ; it is the priesthood of the cross; we exercise it only in sharing in the passion and death of Christ and we add nothing to that priestly act of death, we simply share in it. And we share in it as we are in solidarity with all the victims of this world represented by our dying Lord, and share in their suffering and death. This is our first and fundamental priesthood which we all share by baptism and it is because of this priesthood of all the *laos*, all the people of God, that those who exercise special and essential ministry for the whole people of God (our overseers and elders, bishops and priests) have their priesthood. They have a ministry of teaching and leadership in the priestly people which is dramatised by their preaching and presiding at the Eucharist. But in all this what they are expressing and exercising is the priesthood which belongs to us all. The ordained priest presides at the Eucharist but what he exercises is the priesthood of us all; at Mass we *all* consecrate the bread and wine through the ministry of the priest. He is there to represent our priesthood but not just to represent the congregation here present but the baptismal priesthood of the whole Church throughout the world. The presiding priest is consecrated by the whole Church to represent the whole Church; he is there because we are not simply a local group of Christians praying; we are the whole Church praying and so we are Christ praying, Christ offering his sacrifice, Christ handing himself over to us in the form of food and drink, Christ providing the sacrificial meal in which we show our solidarity with each other and with all the victims of this world, the sacrificial meal in which we are in solidarity with the victim on the cross through whom, at last, all humankind is brought through death and out of death to unity in the eternal life of love.

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