

PRIESTLY MINISTRY

BIBLICAL BASIS

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We reflect in this article on what should be the ministry of priests in our context .i.e; in the context of massive poverty, religious pluralism, communalism, casteism, corruption, child labour, dowry, spread of Hindutva etc.

To understand what should be the ministry of priests today, the main question should not be, 'what' is ministry?; the question should be 'to whom' is ministry? The kind of ministry would be decided by the question 'to whom'. The nature of the ministry would be decided by the people to whom it is meant.

The ministry of Jesus is a good example. In his case, he did not begin his ministry asking the question "What should I do?" Rather, he went about from village to village and saw the sufferings, the difficulties and the problems people had. He experienced and understood the sufferings of the blind, the lame, the handicapped, the sick, the lepers, the possessed and others. He empathized with them, identified himself with them and offered himself to them. So he spent all his time in talking to people, listening to them, healing them and teaching them. Thus the nature of his ministry was determined by the group of people to whom he ministered.

In the Bible too, the ministry of priests have not been the same at all times. We can see three major kinds of priestly ministry:

Priestly Ministry in the Old Testament

Priestly Ministry of Jesus

Priestly Ministry in the Early Church.

I PRIESTLY MINISTRY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. The Earliest Period

During this period priests were not offering sacrifices; that was done by the head of the family. Priests' work during this period was giving oracular divinations (Jud 15:5; 18:5, etc.), instructions, etc.

2. Pre-Monarchic Period

During this period priests served in sanctuaries such as Shiloh, where Eli and his sons ministered and Nob where Abiathar, the high priest ministered. We know from the Bible that Abiathar gave refuge to David when he fled from Saul. During this period priests seem to have offered sacrifices and burnt offerings (1Sam 1:3; 2:21 ff). Oracular prophecy also continued to be a priestly task.

3. Monarchic Period

During the period of kings, the temple of Jerusalem had been built and Solomon appointed Zadok as high priest. During this period organized priesthood emerged (1kgs 4:2ff, 12:26ff). Among the priests there appeared two groups - the higher clergy and the lower clergy. The higher clergy was more busy with political activity than priestly ministry proper. On the other hand, the lower clergy was busy with offering various kinds of sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem.

4. In the Time of Jesus

By the time of Jesus the gap between the higher and the lower clergy had increased. The lower clergy was formed into 24 divisions of service (1Chr.24; Luk.1:5, Ant 7,365). Each division performed service in the temple for one week at a time. They offered several offerings such as sin-offering, burnt-offering, peace-offering etc. For the rest of the time priests carried on other professions. They could pass expert judgements on matters of ritual purity and explain the Tora in the synagogues.

In continuation with the spirit of the prophets (Hos.6:6, Amos.5:21-27, Mic.6:6ff, Isa.1:11,31, Jer.6:20; 7:21, etc.), Jesus opposed the way in which the temple cult was carried out. He put charity and justice before rituals. We see the attitude of Jesus in Mathew 5:23ff. "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come back and offer your gift".

Jesus condemns strongly the priests (high priests) and the Sadducees who were the real negative forces in the society. Cleansing the temple in the Gospels, especially the rending of the veil of the temple at the time of Jesus' death in the Gospel of Mathew clearly show that the sacrificial system and priestly ministry of the Old Testament model have come to an end and a new order has emerged.

II PRIESTLY MINISTRY OF JESUS

Jesus did not come from the priestly line. He was a lay person. He was opposed to the cult as practised in the Old Testament. His ministry was not cultic. He began His ministry with the question "To whom is my ministry?". He found the answer to this question. The marginalized people were the target group of his ministry.

The scope of his ministry is clearly seen in the Nazereth pericope (Luk.4:16-21). He enunciates clearly that he has been sent to proclaim 'the good news to the poor; to give sight to the blind, to release the captives and free the oppressed'. The ideals of the Jubilee year were the focus of his ministry.

1. Ministry in Social Life

Jesus was very friendly with sinners and tax collectors. He was very free with "Am ha aretz". He had frequent dinners with them. During dinner he spent long hours listening to them, to understand them and to emphathize with them. They become his close friends. The Pharisees were annoyed at this and asked the disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with sinners?".

Jesus also healed all kinds of sick persons. He exorcised several people thought to have been possessed by the devil. He gave a lot of

time and attention for healing people. Healing was an important aspect of his ministry. Through healing he not only took away the physical pain and inability but also gave them respectability. The sick people, especially the lepers and the handicapped, who could not enter the temple, could now, like anyone else, join the temple-worship. Certain diseases such as leprosy prevented them from mixing freely with the people. But by healing them from their diseases, he enabled them to join and participate in all public activities.

Besides, healing had also another dimensions. Sicknesses were thought of as results of sins. Healing sicknesses therefore meant that the effect of their sins were done away with. Thus the sick people not only had freedom from physical illness but also freedom from psychological illness. Healings gave them not only physical well being, but also psychological and spiritual well being. Thus the healing ministry of Jesus, to which he gave so much of his time, was really important in Jesus' view.

2. Ministry in Religious Life

Jesus' ministry had also an important religious dimension. The religious laws and institutions were oppressive. Far from making life easy they became real burden on them. The religious rituals were empty and meaningless. They were just external observances. The temple became a place of trading and accumulation of wealth. In Jesus' words it became a 'den of thieves'. The religious leadership at the time of Jesus was selfish and dominating. Leaders were more interested in amassing wealth for themselves than in caring for people. They were hypocrites. They had no sense of direction. So Jesus called them 'white-washed tombs' and 'blind leaders'.

In this context Jesus rejected the old law and gave a new law the law of love. All the commandments, he said, are included in this one law of love. The empty rituals performed during the time of Jesus had to give way to a new way of worship i.e. worship in spirit and truth. Henceforth people would not serve God, by sacrificing animals and so on. But they will serve God by serving the neighbours. The Jerusalem temple was no more needed. It has lost its relevance and meaning. Hence it will be destroyed. In its place a new temple has come up. i.e., the temple raised by God in three days. This temple is none other than

the risen Jesus. The leaders of Jerusalem, according to Jesus, were blind and selfish. In the words of Jesus, they were robbers. They are more busy with destroying life than promoting it. So Jesus set up a new leadership according to the model of the Good Shepherd who would give his life for his flock. The new leaders following the example of Jesus were ready to serve and not to be served.

3. Ministry in Economic Life

Jesus' teachings and actions had economic significance. His association and fellowship with the poor was noted by everyone. He held that the poor people are specially blessed by God. He started a movement of the poor which for him was the kingdom community.

Sharing was the basic requirement to be a member of this community. Those who join this community must sell their belongings and give them to the poor. We know the case of the rich young man, who when invited to sell his possessions and give them to the poor, went away sad. Sharing was also the main focus of his teaching. Accounts of the "multiplication of loaves" are eloquent witnesses to the spirit of sharing.

Jesus' teachings also focused on social justice. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, those who came at the last hour also received the same pay as those who had come early in the morning. When the latter protested against this mode of payment Jesus defended it. According to him payment should be on the basis of need.

4. Ministry in Political Life

There were several political forces during Jesus' time. There were the Romans who were the colonial masters. There were the Herodians who were ruling Galilee paying tribute to the Romans. The Sanhedrin composed mostly of Sadducees and priests, exercised power in most areas the life of the Jews. The Zealots, members of a nationalist movement, wished to drive the Romans away from their land by violence.

Jesus did not belong to anyone of these factions. They were all dominating forces. They believed in violent and unjust means. According to Jesus people must be politicized. They must be made

aware of their rights and obligations. They themselves should make decisions for their life. Active participation by the people in decision-making process is genuine political action. So Jesus was for participation and de-centralization.

5. Ministry in Spiritual Life

Though whatever has been said in the four areas listed above could be called spiritual activity, yet there are specific areas on which we focus in this section. People in the days of Jesus were often in despair because of the oppression they experienced. They were victims of inferiority complex and guilt-feeling. Anxiety and fear filled their lives. In this situation several psychological and mental disorders resulted. The feeling that they were sinners and not good people tormented them.

Time and again Jesus said to them "Have faith". This, he said against despair which was so common. He also focused on the dignity and worth of the people as God's children, against inferiority complex. He made them aware that before God they were good people. Hence they should avoid guilt feeling and the feeling of being wretched sinners. He helped them to get rid of anxiety and fear which crippled them. He spent much of his time in healing people from psychological and mental disorders, which they called as possession by the devils.

All the above said actions of Jesus in social, religious, economic, political and spiritual life are reflected in the Magnificat, the song of Mary. The Magnificat shows very clearly that the liberation Jesus brought about was integral.

III PRIESTLY MINISTRY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

As we have seen already, the ministry of Jesus was very prophetic. But the authorities of the early church, especially St. Paul, focused on community building. If Jesus' ministry was more prophetic, Paul's ministry was more pastoral.

1. Jerusalem Community

In Jerusalem the early Christian community was built up on sharing. People are said to have sold their possessions and put them at

the feet of the apostles for common use. There was no one in need. They are said to have been 'one heart and one soul'. Thus the early Christian community was no more exclusively of the poor. It was not just a movement of the poor, as it was during the ministry of Jesus. Now anyone, rich or poor, could be a member of the Christian Community as long as he or she listened to God's word and showed readiness to share.

The Jerusalem community was a praying community, too. Prayer was one of its four characteristic traits. Along with prayer, fellowship (koinonia), listening to Apostles' preaching and breaking of bread were those four traits (Acts 2:42). Coming from the Jewish background 'praying' must have been a spontaneous and regular activity of the first Christians. Praying befitted their call as 'priestly people' (1Pt 2:5). Apostles should have animated the prayer of the Jerusalem community.

The practice of the 'breaking of the bread' among Christians was very early. This was one among the four characteristic traits of the Jerusalem community as indicated by Acts (2:42). This was done in remembrance of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. But the early Christians must have added to the breaking of the bread, prayer formulas of the Jews before meals. Sharing of food was the most important act during the breaking of bread as reported in 1Cor 11. 1Cor 11 is the first indication of the Eucharistic celebration among the early Christians. It was celebrated at private homes. Initially the Apostles and later the leaders of the Christian communities must have presided over these celebrations, since institutional priesthood has not appeared so far. But Eucharistic celebration by the people animated by their leaders befitted their status as the priestly people!

2. Pauline Communities

St. Paul founded communities all over the Mediterrenian world. His communities existed in several cities of the Middle East and Europe such as Antioch (Syria), Derbe, Lystra, Antioch (Pisidia), Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Boerea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, etc. He spent much of his time in the building up of these communities. His efforts were mainly reducing tensions, solving problems, working for unity and promoting sharing among them. He made serious efforts to

collect funds for the poor people of Jerusalem.

Thus the focus is no more on the prophetic radicality of Jesus which led to his violent death. The focus is now on evangelization. Extraordinary efforts were made to build up Christian communities and 'priestly' ministry centred around community-building, giving guidance to learn to live together.

Worship was an essential part of the life of the Pauline communities. Paul, the founder of these communities, was a man of prayer. He prays intensely for his people. Most of his letters begin and end with prayer. Paul prays for the sanctification of his people (Rom 15:13; Phil 1:9-11; 1Thes 3:12-13etc). He prays for unity and harmony among them (Rom 15:5). He prays for comfort, hope and perseverance of his people (Rom 15:3; 1Cor 1:8; 2Cor 1:4; Phil 1:10 etc) He also asks his people to pray for his mission (Rom 10:1; 2 Thes 3:1-2). He urges them to pray always (1Thes 5:17f. Col 4:2). One can see this as an aspect of his 'priestly' function. In fact he looks at his evangelizing ministry as a "priestly service" (Rom 15:16).

Eucharistic celebration was an essential part of the worship of the Pauline communities, as it was in the life of all early Christian communities. We have evidence of such a celebration in the Corinthian church (1Cor 11:17ff). Though Paul is displeased with the way they celebrated the Lord's Supper (by each one eating his or her own food, without waiting for the other brethren), he affirms that they came together frequently to celebrate the Eucharist. Such celebrations in which the Christians of his churches exercised their priesthood, were animated by the community leaders.

Baptism, too, seems to have been administered to those who wished to be members of the church. Baptism which was in vogue in Qumran and administered by John, the Baptist was adopted by the early churches, including those of Paul. We see Philip (Acts 8:26ff) baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch. There are very many references to baptism in the letters of Paul. But Paul himself does not seem to regard baptism as his primary duty (1Cor 1:14 off). In a time when institutional priests have not emerged community leaders administered baptism.

3. Other Early Christian Communities

As time went on, Christian Communities learned to borrow norms and regulations from others, especially the Stoics. Whenever they did not have any specific guidance to a particular situation, they felt free to borrow regulations from the Stoics and others. But of course they never failed to christianise these norms and regulations by adding expression like 'in the Lord' 'because of the Lord', etc. These borrowed regulations are called the 'household codes' which we find in Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:22-6:9; 1Tim 2:8-15; 6:1-2; Tit 2:1-10; 1Pt 2:13-3:7.

The Pastoral Letters speak of varieties of prayer such as supplications, intercessions, thanksgivings etc (1Tim 2:1). People are urged to pray for the Rulers (1Tim 2:2). In fact they must pray for all men (1Tim 2:1) because God wants every one to be saved (1Tim 2:4). Thus the practice of prayer, deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, was alive and flourishing. The celebration of the Lord's Supper and administration of baptism were kept up. They were animated by the community leaders i.e., supervisors (bishops).

Healing and praying for the sick was always part of the activities of the Christian communities. Such a prayer for the sick along with anointing with oil comes to focus in the Letter of James (5:13-16). This ministry to the sick will slowly develop into the sacrament of anointing of the sick. Thus the 'priestly activity' of the Christians slowly embraces more and more areas of Christian life.

Though Jesus never expressed his God-willed activities as priestly and called himself a priest, the basis for calling his mission as priestly is found in his own words. He interprets his atoning death as a "ransom for many" (Mk 10:45 par). His words during last supper (Mk 14:24 "this is my blood which is poured out for many") confirm this. Paul also underlines the sacrificial character of Jesus' death (1Cor 5:8; Rom 3:25; 8:3 etc) and speaks of his mediatorship (Gal 3:20). But it is the author of the Letter to the Hebrews who for the first time ascribes priesthood to Christ and explicitly calls him the 'High Priest' (4:14f; 5:5 etc.) Christian tradition gladly accepted this identification and ascribed this title 'priest' also to the ministers of Christ who continued his mission. And all genuine Christian activities, whether performed by Christ's ordained ministers or by the Christian Faithful can be called

"priestly".

Conclusion

Concerning the theme of priestly ministry in the Bible, we have spoken of three models, namely priesthood according to (i) Old Testament model, (ii) Jesus' model, (iii) Early Church model. Among these three models we may not insist on the first one - the Old Testament model of priestly ministry which was purely political and cultic. Prophets of the Old Testament condemned the cultic activities and put justice and love before cult. Jesus too rejected the Old Testament model of ministry.

The other two models complement each other. We need the Jesus' model namely the prophetic model very much in a country like India where there is so much of injustice, violence, oppression, marginalization, etc. At the same time we also need the early church model of ministry, namely the pastoral model. We have to build up communities. We have to inculcate the values of the kingdom of God such as love, joy, peace, equality, brotherhood, sharing etc in the Christian communities. Thus both the prophetic and pastoral models complement each other and enrich each other.

But, we have to keep in mind that ministry in the prophetic model will require sacrifices and bring persecutions. In the prophetic ministry opposition is inevitable. The prophets were fiercely opposed. The great prophet Jesus was put to death on the cross. We have witnessed in the last years so much of persecutions, especially in North India. At least nine priests and six sisters have lost their lives within a short span of time, because their ministry was prophetic. People are ready to appreciate ministers when they are involved in education. They praise them when they do development works. They adore them when they see them as 'spiritual persons' ('spirituality' in their own understanding). But they are opposed, persecuted and even killed when they are involved in the work of social transformation or prophetic ministry. Though oppositions and prosecutions are bitter, there can be no other way for the Church than being prophetic, while at the same time also being pastoral.