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Ministry to the Lord

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"But ye shall be named the priests of the Lord; men shall call you the ministers of our God" (Isa. 61:6).

"They ministered to the Lord..." (Acts 13:2).

"The vessels of the ministry..." (Heb. 9:21).

Our word is about ministry to the Lord and, as this passage in Isaiah makes clear, it does not stand alone, but is related to a great volume in the Scriptures on the subject. This ministry to the Lord is priestly ministry - "priests of the Lord", "ministers of God".

Priesthood a Function

I want to say at the outset that priesthood is not primarily or firstly an office. It is first of all a *function*; that is, the ministry of priests is something to be done, before it is someone or some people to do it. It is the thing which has to be done that comes first, the people who do it come afterwards. That is a very important thing to remember. In the Old Testament, even the high priest could be deposed and even killed under the judgment of God, and at best the high priest and the priests continued for a little while as instruments in their office, but the priestly ministry went on.

There is no immunity because of high and sacred office. When the priests fail, they are set aside, as is seen in a number of personal cases in the Old Testament, but also in the case of Israel as a nation, called to be a nation of priests and a kingdom of priests. The pre-eminent function to which that nation was called was the priestly ministry, and when the priestly ministry failed, the nation was set aside. What I am emphasizing is that this is a *ministry*, and not certain people called 'priests', not a class of people, not an office, but a *function*, a ministry, and it is the ministry to which all the Lord's people are called, not just some as a class amongst them. But of course, we shall best see what this priestly ministry is as we look at the work fulfilled, and see just what the function was and is, remembering that, while instruments come and go, the ministry is timeless; it continues. We know who are priests by seeing the ministry fulfilled, not by seeing certain people called by that name. If the ministry is not being fulfilled, then the priesthood does not exist.

We must, then, enquire: What is the ministry? For our purpose just now, I am going to take you to one phase of priestly ministry as connected with the tabernacle by way of illustration. In the tabernacle, the priestly ministry had three aspects. That is carried over, of course, in Christ to the church, in His ministry and ours in Him.

Ministry in the Outer Court

The priestly function in the tabernacle was threefold in this way: firstly, in the court; secondly, in the holy place; and thirdly, in the Most holy place - three phases of priestly function, each with its own particular significance.

In the first, the outer court, we have the priesthood in operation again in three parts. You will understand I am giving you a bare outline of things; you must do the filling in, for there is a great mass of it.

(a) The World Excluded

Firstly, in the court priestly function was in the power by which the world was put back, excluded, and kept out. That is the key to so much in the Word. You know the Word, just let your minds run over the Old Testament in connection with the priesthood, and you will see how, all the time, it was the priesthood that was engaged in keeping the world out, standing against the world.

There are some very strong instances of that, for instance, the case of the young king, the child king, Josiah, when Athaliah, that wicked woman, had slain all the seed royal, and little Josiah had been hidden. It was the high priest and the priests who formed the bodyguard of Josiah against Athaliah and her intentions and wicked ways. They compassed him about day and night to preserve him. It was priestly function against the breaking in of the evil world. We could take many instances of that kind.

What I am pointing out is that the function of priesthood in the first place is to put the world out and keep it out, to stand as a bulwark against the encroachments of this world into the things of God, to keep the Lord's people and the Lord's things untouched, untainted, unmolested by the spirit and the ways of this world. If you are doing that, then you are a priest. It means standing where you are; not in a particular building or adorned with vestments, but where you are in your daily employment, against the inrush and overflow of this world in its spirit and ways, standing as a testimony solidly against the world and bearing the responsibility and suffering the consequences of doing so.

The church has failed and every Christian has failed in the primary object of their being when they have become worldly. When the world gets into the church, the church has lost its function. When Christians have been tainted by this world, they cannot minister to the Lord. So in the outer court, the very first thing was to say: here is a line drawn between what is of God and this world, there is a barrier and here inside is another realm, and that realm out there is cut off. In their ministry at the brazen altar inside the door, they were ever testifying against the power of this world.

(b) The Life of Nature Countered

Then also within that court the ministry of the priests was the abiding counter to the life of nature. The brazen altar testified to the end of one realm, and the beginning of another. The laver testified to the setting aside of the life of nature; we call it the flesh, the self-life. The ministry of priests there in that court was an abiding testimony against the life of nature and the old creation having place and control and influence; a daily washing of feet in contact with that old creation.

All the details are themselves suggestive, but the inclusiveness is this: that priestly ministry there in the outer court said, No! to self, No! to the flesh, No! to nature, No! to the old creation, and we are only priests in the measure in which that life of nature is set aside, and we can only minister to the Lord in the measure in which we are no longer after the flesh, but after the Spirit. That is priestly function, and if the church has natural life predominating, governing, influencing its ways, its methods, and its life, it has lost its priestly ministry, it cannot minister to the Lord, it is in weakness.

(c) Spiritual Death Resisted

Then the third thing in the court was this, that there was by this priestly ministry an effectual testimony against death and that in the power of righteousness. "Life because of righteousness" (Rom. 8:10) is Paul's great phrase, and you see that there it is a question of a continual battle with death - the fire upon the altar. What is the brazen altar? It is the tremendous power of righteousness in the brass with the fire never going out, a testimony against the encroachment and power of death, for from that altar the blood was taken to sprinkle everything, to make everything live - the laver, the curtains, the vessels, the mercy seat, everything taken through, "that he die not", a testimony against spiritual death, the great inclusive enemy of the Lord's people.

Again, it is the function of priesthood. If we are standing as a mighty resistance to spiritual death in virtue of the Blood of our Lord Jesus, we are priests. If the church is doing that, it is a priestly church; if that testimony of Life as constantly setting back spiritual death is there, then that is a priestly people.

That is only in the court. Very many of the Lord's people are quite satisfied to remain in the outer court. They are in Christ, saved from death, they have Life, they have left the world, and they are content with that, but it is only one of three aspects of Life.

Ministry in the Holy Place

The holy place is the second phase of priestly ministry. You know what was in the holy place: the lampstand with its never dying light, the altar of incense with its sweet savour, its fragrance unto God, and the table of shewbread. This is another phase of priestly ministry. It has to do with provision for the Lord's people in service.

The Lord's people are a ministering people; they are called to serve the Lord. That was the great word about their coming out, their deliverance, their emancipation from Egypt - "that they may serve Me". They are saved - that is the outer court; they are brought into fellowship - that is the inner court. They are the Lord's people and they have the blessings of redemption, of salvation, but they are called to be a serving people - "that they may serve Me" and service centres in the holy place. And for service, certain things are essential, and this is priestly ministry, to see that the Lord's people have what is necessary in service.

(a) The Ministry of Christ

Very briefly, they must have the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). They must have the revelation of Christ; that is the lampstand. It is Christ and the light which falls upon Him as upon all else. Priestly ministry is that which makes available to the Lord's people the ever-growing fulness of the revelation of Christ; to keep Him, in His inexhaustible fulness, ever in view.

You have your measure of revelation and enlightenment. Are you making it available to others? That is the testimony of Jesus in the lampstand. Are you walking in the light of the Lord, not for yourself alone, but for others, that they may see the Lord because you are walking in the light of the Lord? That is priestly ministry. Do others see the Lord in us in growing measure? Is it true that others can know more of the Lord by means of us, and growingly more as we go on with the Lord? If so, we are priests; that is the Lord's service, that is ministering to the Lord.

(b) Spiritual Food for the Lord's People

Then, in service there is the matter of spiritual food for the Lord's people. The table, the bread is for service, for ministry, that the Lord's people are sustained. The priests were sustained. It was food for the priests that they might fulfil their ministry, and as we come to know in increasing measure that which Christ is as our Life, our fulness, that spiritually becomes a benefit to the Lord's people. In the type, of course, the priests who fed from that table ministered to all the Lord's people in the strength of what they themselves were receiving and taking of Christ, and so that strength became the strength of the Lord's people as a whole.

And this bread is just Christ in His heavenly nature, another humanity than the one with which we are so familiar, that New Man. Are we really the means of the strengthening of the Lord's people by what is becoming increasingly precious to us of Christ? That is priestly ministry. Do you know what a priest is now? A priest is one who is ministering received Life, what Christ is to others; one who is ministering to others strength, because of what Christ is continually becoming to them.

(c) Communion with God on Behalf of His People

Then the altar of incense: the power of communion with the Lord, prayer, intercession, supplication; the power of communion with the Lord on behalf of His people, and that power is seated in the excellencies of the Lord Jesus. The incense speaks of the glories, the excellencies, the perfections of Christ. In order to minister to the Lord, we must have a growing apprehension and appreciation of the glories of Christ: His perfections, merits, His worthiness, all He is as acceptable to the Father, is the ground of our communion with God, getting us away from what we are in ourselves - that horrible ground which can never gain favour with God or have any hold upon God. That is the

ground of a stronghold on God, and how we need a prevailing position with God on behalf of His people. That is the priestly function, to prevail with God. How can this flesh prevail with God? How can this wretched nature of ours prevail with God? How can anything of ourselves have power with God? It cannot! But here is this sweet incense, here are all the perfections of Christ, a powerful hold on God, and that makes it possible for us to intercede and prevail on behalf of the Lord's people. These are the three aspects of service or priestly function, centred in the holy place.

Ministry in the Most Holy Place

The third phase is the Most holy place. There are other things true of each of these aspects, but I am having to leave them. When we come into the Most holy place, there are meanings beyond what we can speak of or even mention now; I am only touching upon one.

In the Most holy place, the priesthood or the priestly ministry is intended by God to keep ever in view the fact that the Lord's people are a heavenly people. There was a veil, and while the people were an earthly people, that veil remained. When everything which could make them a heavenly people was actually done, the veil was rent, and now there is no veil, and we know from the letter to the Hebrews that passing through that veil represents Christ entering into heaven itself, and the veil itself was His flesh, or the type of His flesh, that which came between earth and heaven. And when His flesh was rent, that which was between earth and heaven was set aside, and the way right in was opened.

Now there is only one issue to this priestly ministry, that is heaven itself, and that is now. It is that this aspect of priestly ministry should be maintained. It is the aspect which has been lost more than any other: keeping always before the Lord's people that they are a heavenly people; the rending of the veil is the testimony to that fact.

You have those two priesthoods mentioned in Hebrews: the Aaronic and that of Melchizedek. The Aaronic priesthood was to meet the needs of the Lord's people here on this earth. The priesthood of Melchizedek is eternal, timeless and universal. It is the heavenly, and Christ is a Priest after the order of Melchizedek, which means that, coming into that priesthood, we are lifted away from earth, we are brought into the eternal, the universal, and if we want proof of that, note the different ministries of Peter and Paul. Peter's ministry is to strangers and pilgrims on earth, a necessary ministry. We need the Aaronic aspect of ministry while we are here. But Paul is in the heavenlies in Christ; Paul's ministry takes us off the earth. When we come to Paul, it is not time at all, it is linked with the eternities; it is not the earth at all, it is the universe. That is where the church is, and it is a very vital aspect of our priestly function, our ministry, that we keep the Lord's people ever in remembrance of the fact that they are pre-eminently a heavenly people, a timeless people; their roots are not here, their relationships are not here. Are we doing that? Are we priests?

You need not think any more of that word as some kind of person, some ecclesiastic. I speak to you as the priests of the Lord. Are we priests? Are we functioning? That determines whether we are priests. Are we keeping the world out, standing against the world in the things of God? Are we keeping the life of nature out in the power of the Spirit? Are we standing against the encroachment of spiritual death, the testimony of Life? Are we in our place in the heavenlies, and keeping that glorious reality ever in view for the Lord's people, a *heavenly* people, not an earthly church? Then we shall be called priests of the Lord, ministers of our God, and we shall be ministering to the Lord as vessels of ministry.