

In 'New Hearts for New Models', Daniel uses images to help us understand the kind of priestly service needed in our time. Each of us is called, through baptism, to be priest, prophet and servant-king to one another. Although written primarily for priests, hopefully these images will help us all.

Daniel's Reflection for week beginning 21st March

Priest as Healer of Fear

Not every priest would readily recognise himself as a healer of fear. We hold so much fear before the unknown, especially before the unknown within ourselves. We need to recognise too that throughout history, fear has been used as an agent of control and coercion by many groups and institutions. To our shame, clericalism and authoritarianism within the church has done the same. The ministry of the priest, at heart, is about transcending and transforming fear into the grace of love until, one day, God will be All in all. It was by revealing to us our true nature that Jesus overcame and harnessed for us the power of our fear. Original sin is about our resistance to this revelation. Our fear betrays the power we still concede to those threatening places within us. Writing these lines on Easter Monday morning, I believe that it was only fear itself that stayed nailed to the cross of Good Friday. . .

I'm sure it is true to say that the main role of the priest, like that of Jesus, is to dismantle the strange power of fear over our lives. When he listens in the Spirit, the priest is creating order out of the chaos of someone's depression. Pure, creative, compassionate listening is intense with spiritual energy. It is an imaginative interpretation of what is happening in someone's soul, or in our own, or in that of society. It is a deciphering of the drama of Jesus in the story of individuals and communities. It is a rewriting of the unfolding of our lives in the light of Holy Week.

By his contemplative presence to what he is doing, be that listening, preaching, celebrating or silence, the healer of fear is allowing the radical truth of each situation, no matter how contorted, complicated or contradictory it may seem, to emerge. This truth is sheer gift; It is a healing wisdom that brings clarity, order and peace to confused and tormented parishioners. It is the first grace of the Holy Spirit that ends our misery by naming our journey, thereby removing the ignorance, the root cause of fear. And in some mysterious way, this happens within the very person of the priest. He heals by absorbing into himself the jagged edges and broken bits of people's lives. It is in himself like Jesus, that the priest reconciles all things. For those priests who endeavour to live out this model of ministry, it goes without saying that it is a recipe for the kind of breakthrough that brings crucifixion and passover in its wake. . . .

Not everyone, however, allows their shadow to draw near enough to be recognised. It is here that the priest has such a crucial role to play. It is here that he prays with his people for an increase in their faith and courage. It is here that he reminds them that they can do all things in Christ; But though they should walk in the Valley of death there is no evil to fear. And at this point of pain, in the here and now, the priest will emphasise that the moment of Salvation, the fruits of redemption, the hard-won freedom of the children of God, is enfleshed and experienced by the individual, in time and space. From his pastoral presence the priest can give many examples of that interface of disclosure, those moments of transcendence when the grace we carry by virtue of our birth and baptism erupts from within the fearful so to flood the arid spirit. In the desert of the heart, let the healing fountain start. . .

The priest will remind his people that whenever we consciously face loneliness and rejection, when we accept responsibility for our sins and destructive drives, when we refuse to give up despite immense pressure to call it a day, when we stay faithful to our vocations in spite of failure or betrayal by ourselves or others, when we are falsely accused and refrain from blaming, when we are struck down by failure, disgrace or diminishment and still trust, when we continue to believe in beauty in the face of ugliness and lies, when we forgive those who try to destroy us and seek reconciliation, when our broken hearts find new power- when any of these things happen to us, there, and there only, is the moment of truth the timeless time when the saints are made.

(New Hearts for New Models pp 50-53)