

Heart Thinking – Mediating Holiness in Ministry

(with special reference to university chaplaincy ministry)

A paper for the Open Anglicanism Study Day on Professor Daniel W. Hardy

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Good supervisors are not often remembered for the notes they made in the margins of work handed to them at ten day intervals. They are remembered for being who they were. Good supervisors, like all good teachers, change lives. They are liberators. They enable those who are privileged to work with them to become fully what God intended them to be, even if the person concerned is in denial about their own capabilities. Dan Hardy had little time for such timorous modesty. He took people's work seriously.

For those who were also training for ordination, his serious engagement with the whole person in the rigours of doctoral research, allowed that person to uncover a truth which was unique to their calling, and which would reflect something of God in the way they subsequently lived it out. Dan's wise companionship shaped the particularity of a person's vocation from within the thesis itself by allowing thought and a sense of God's presence to inform and be bound up in the process of uncovering that truth. Truth and calling would be discovered afresh in the subtleties and nuances of conversations about God.

But for theologians working with Dan, these conversations were not simply *about* God. They took place from *within* God. Thinking and talking about God generated its own life-giving energy, the energy of worship which derives from Wisdom and leads us into all truth. Thinking with Dan Hardy was therefore conversational worship, to be picked up at each meeting wherever it connected in new ways with the work and with where that work intersected with priestly formation.

My own research was about reconciliation in the Anglican Communion, which was then in the early stages of what remains an ongoing conflict. The Anglican life of communion, which is its life in God, seemed to be slowing down. Our conversations revealed that the problem facing the Church, and many of its priests, is a spiritual one, a disconnection of its functional existence from the movement of God's love and of his purpose for the Church in the world. It follows that anyone tasked with ministry is called to re-make that connection, to function prophetically as a healer and to be a channel of God's energy into the world. He or she is called to mediate truth, as re-creative energy, in such a way as to allow it to move further and further outwards, so that the ripple effect of God's love can be experienced as truth revealed in people's lives. Love informing truth thereby constitutes holiness.

In this respect, ministry, like research, is always work in progress. Just as ideas generate more ideas, the ripple effect of God's loving outreach releases holiness in others which must not be blocked or interrupted. Rather, the outward movement of holiness, mediated through those who minister, should be felt in all other aspects of the Church's life. For this to be possible, its inner life, its relationships as these are informed by its life in God, needs to be permeable. Internal conflicts and resistance to change block this permeability, inhibiting the dynamic outward movement of God's holiness from the Church into the world, so creating a spiritual crisis.

Spiritual Crisis

Conversations with Dan would often return to the need to reconnect the outer polity of the Church to its inner life. As we talked, it became clear that priests are called to be connectors, or mediators, using all their talents and gifts to reveal holiness in the Church and to affirm it in the people they serve. My own experience of university chaplaincy provided tangible evidence of this. University chaplains mediate holiness through sacramental hospitality. Hospitality is practised in the spirit of the Eucharist, in which holiness is realised in the *koinonia* of chaplaincy life, in its individual friendships and in the sociality shaped by praying and thinking together, whether in a formal bible study context or in meals and celebrations.

In the context of chaplaincy ministry, being together for worship and for times of study brought our thinking into the 'heart' activity of worship, thereby integrating worship with thinking as 'heart thinking'. Heart thinking became a shared affirmation and celebration of a single reality and a common purpose which was to know and love one another better from within Christ. This deeper level of engagement also affirmed the Chaplaincy's Anglican identity within the university. Being Anglican spoke of unconditional welcome from within a shared love for the same Lord as it allowed for different ways of thinking about the reality of God's presence in our midst through the interface of different kinds of worship which led into shared work in the context of the university itself.

Accepting one another's different conceptions of reality required the kind of trust which comes from accepting that we were in a relationship shaped by God's love. This, and not competing identities defined within socio-theological parameters, is what makes holiness 'attractive' to others, as students of different denominations and churchmanships found when they worked together for the common good in the wider context of the university. Being a certain kind of people in a particular space created the basis for contextual mission as Dan would have understood it. It depended on our ability to discern Christ in what Dan called 'our interweaving'¹ which teaches us to discern him in whatever context or situation we meet others. This will necessarily involve a deepening of our shared spiritual life. The recovery of the life of the spirit in the Church's collective life is a pre-requisite for effective mission, by which I mean living out the Gospel in ways which makes it attractive to the secular world, the secular world being the primary context in which God is revealed.

¹ *God's Ways With the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith*, 'The Modes and Operation of Contextuality', T&T Clark, Edinburgh, (1996) p73

Living in this way, as a missional church or community, has a dynamic of its own. It is a constant 'becoming' which involves discovering and developing a shared objective. It corresponds to the dynamic and the wisdom of God's holiness, the two being part of a single divine attribute that point where God's activity intersects with and transforms the world. Those who minister, whether ordained or lay, are concerned with mediating this holiness, both in the world and in the Church itself, in being a particular kind of person, as a priest, and a particular kind of people as a worshipping community in any given context .

In the Church, the points of intersection are located where the life of the institution meets, and sometimes collides with, the needs and affinities of individuals and interest groups, and those which shape its organisational concerns. Issue driven politics and the general politicisation of relationships within the Church sever its life from the depth and dynamic of God's love, the love which makes the Church recognisably holy. This is where Dan's 'contextually sensitive mission' is so badly needed.² In the life of the Church, each 'context' (women or non-heterosexual people, to name only two) has its own set of objectives, but they are also contingently related within the ultimate shared objective of making the Gospel meaningful in the world. Each has its separate contextuality which needs to be understood at the deepest level. Hence, those who are tasked with mediating holiness *into* the Church (specifically, its bishops) must also know the Church 'intrinsically', in its inner life. They must sense and experience its need and pain from *within* Christ. The fruits of such discernment will inform the way others (priests, deacons and all God's people) will mediate that same holiness into their own missional contexts. So the Church, in its permeability, is on the outside and simultaneously at the centre, or fulcrum, of where God's activity intersects with that of the world.

Mediating holiness

It is in this particular respect that working in a university chaplaincy context was both challenging and rewarding. Chaplaincies are permeable. They are also transit places, where students come at a time of crisis, or out of passing curiosity. They may never return, but they take with them something of its inner life, its holiness. Chaplaincies are also liminal and fluid. They are on the edge of university life and at the same time at its epicentre. Where there is no obvious church presence in the form of a designated worshipping space, the chaplaincy is effectively 'invisible', so it is the chaplain who must become whatever the church needs to be in that place at any given time. The chaplain is therefore called to mediate the holiness of God by being a particular kind of person, hidden but also visible, pertaining to a church which is physically present but as yet undiscovered.³

This unified vision has informed my own ministry as a priest who is also a writer. Writing books, blogging, maintaining a web site and occasional forays into the world of twitter and facebook all reveal contexts which need to be understood at a deeper level than is often initially apparent. They require a nuanced and pastoral ministry, one which respects the contextual language and personal circumstances of people who may need to meet Christ in

² *Finding the Church: The Dynamic Truth of Anglicanism*, Introduction, SCM Press, London (2001), p.2

³ *God's Ways With the World*, 'Chaplains in Higher Education', p.213 ff.

their lives, people who one has never met oneself. Here, more than anywhere, contextualised mission comes with a sense of the holy which is already in the world, and in people, by allowing the secular and the spiritual to overlap and inform each other.

Ministering through the internet, as well as in specific localities, such as a chaplaincy or parish, invites a continual reflection and re-questioning of both purpose and context; The priest will be concerned with discerning God's purpose for a particular place or community, while the one ministering through the internet will be sensing that purpose in the less bounded sphere of politics, and in the ordering of societies, including that of the universal Church. In both cases, he or she stands between what Dan calls the truth, as it proceeds from God, whose purpose is the summation of human well being and happiness, and where that truth intersects with 'life in today's world'.⁴ Mediating that truth, mediating holiness, requires that the mediators live in a particular way. Their lives must signal a certain dynamic, a continual becoming which is also a continual process of re-learning, or what Dan calls the 'the God-ward dimension of Wisdom'.⁵

Learning is an ongoing and integral part of life. It should therefore be charged with God's own dynamic and at the same time informed from within God's life. In ministry, learning comes with attention to God and to prevailing political and social concerns which manifest the need for holy wisdom. This kind of re-learning is neither theoretical or programmatic. It has no 'learning objective' other than that a person, and the Church itself, should become more what they need to be, as this accords with the loving purposes of God. Dan would have described it as a composite process of sensing and thinking, of knowing and not knowing, an ongoing and vital re-creative process leading to the transformation of the human person and of the Church. It is a matter of heart and mind working together, of heart thinking.

Heart thinking

Dan's theology, and the wisdom he passed on to those who were privileged to work with him, was of the heart. He taught me that academic work is valuable because it is to be undertaken in bringing together the activity of heart and mind, of what he called 'shaping the human spirit for wisdom and godliness',⁶ the two being coterminous. This is especially so for the theologian who is also a priest. Dan would often remind us that it is not easy to be an academic priest. At first, I assumed he meant that there would be a difficult choice to make; that you could only be one or the other. But what I learned from the hours I spent with him was that a priest is called to minister from within the fullness of both heart and mind, the one enriching the other. Thinking about God and about the things which matter to him requires that we converse with God at the deepest level. Such a conversation will be echoed in all pastoral and didactic exchanges, as a compassionate discernment of truth applied to a given situation, or to the wider context of what Dan called sociality. Ministry which derives from heart thinking speaks *into* the reality of the world, and into that part of the Church which is *of*

⁴ *Finding the Church*, 'Truth, the Churches and their Mission' p.127

⁵ *Finding the Church*. 'Theological Education in the Mission of the Church' p.173

⁶ *Ibid.* p.174

the world, so that the truth can be released and subsequently worked into the lives of both. Dan's thinking is a timely reminder of the fact that the Church must be prophetic before it can be missional.

Prophecy is essentially a pastoral task. In addressing the needs of the individual, those who minister have primary responsibility for mediating holiness by challenging the material, as well as all the destructive emotions which drive material desires – in other words, whatever obscures the holy in any one person, Church, or socio-political set of circumstances. Thus, in the world, as with the individual, the one who ministers is given the task of aiding in the salvific process of transformation by facing down what Dan called 'the monolith of production and consumption'.⁷ They are to be in the world as ones who stand at the point where God's purpose is to meet and judge the world in holiness. Judgment is therefore encounter, involving mutual recognition and acceptance. Here again, Chaplaincy ministry has much to say.

Ministry

A University chaplaincy is a 'tent of meeting'. Radical hospitality informs all aspects of its life because its purpose is to bring people together so as to make it possible for them to encounter God. In this respect, the chaplaincy meets two distinct needs; the need which students have for one another in surroundings which can seem at first alien and even threatening, and their need for God. Chaplaincies are intended to be places where people will encounter God often without realising that they have done so until much later. Furthermore, listening and learning from others faces Christians of different denominations and churchmanships with a choice; whether or not to allow healing to begin its transforming work of breaking down distrust, thereby preparing the way for deep reconciliation.

Dan's theology was a call to a contemplation of God which would give rise to prophetic ministry and prophetic action sourced from within God's holiness, but neither of these can occur prior to reconciliation. Reconciliation is therefore the condition for holiness, the 'krisis' point of the Church's life. It is also a matter of choice and will. The priority of reconciliation confronts the Church with the question which Jesus asks of the man at the Bethesda pool, 'Do you *want* to be healed?' Does he really want to get up and walk, rather than blame others for his predicament? It is being asked of the Church today, in Wales and in England, in the aftermath of the Governing Body and Synod votes to allow women bishops and, allowing for the culture and politics of individual nations, it is also being asked in the debates over sexuality and marriage. Do we really *want* to move together into a new place in our life together? Do we want our relationships to embody the loving purpose of God for the world? Do we really want to be holy?

Dan spoke of the idea of holiness, and of the life of God himself, as being inherently relational and dynamic. 'The Lord confers holiness (in) establishing a relationship with a people called to be holy'⁸, he writes. My own research on reconciliation in the Church, and

⁷ *Ibid.* 'Salvation as holiness' p.?

⁸ *Finding the Church*, 'Worship and the Formation of a Holy People', p.11

my ministry as a university chaplain, owed much to this central tenet of Dan's thinking. Building trust and establishing relationships which are holy involves a desire to understand others and to be in solidarity with them in Christ. In the context of a university chaplaincy, it became clear that such relationships begin with learning to understand and speak the truth language of others in the way one might learn to speak a foreign language.

We learn a foreign language not only to communicate, but out of a desire to find commonality, to understand and be understood at a deeper heart level. This is only possible when we want to know others better and so understand what makes them who they are. Similarly, in the life of the Church, moving into new and more intuitive ways of understanding the world and society requires a degree of trust which comes with the will to know holiness as it is in those who may be sceptical of religion, or who distrust the Church as they perceive it. Again, it is a matter of heart thinking, of wanting to understand others from within their own contextuality, the culture and circumstances which make them who they are theologically as well as personally.

Truth language is itself contextual, shaped by a person's own journey towards God. It requires a dynamic response, insofar as hearing and understanding the truth as others understand it obliges us to move away from the propositional, in which one set of arguments are 'true' and the other 'false', and one party 'right' and the other 'wrong', into the realm of heart thinking, one which is essentially fluid or 'mobile' in a sapiential sense.

This sapiential mobility changes the way we perceive truth in making it possible for us to discern the intrinsic holiness in others. The relatedness required for learning another's truth language reintegrates their truth, and our own, within its common regenerative source, the relationship of the incarnate Word with the Father and the intrinsic relatedness of the Trinity. Dan's theology was concerned with enabling the theologian and the practitioner to bring others to an encounter with this truth, and thereby with holiness, not as (what he called) a 'reified emptiness', but as God's transforming work which is the experience of God in the concrete reality of life as it is. For Dan, transformation constituted the salvific work of God which makes 'seeing through' to the holy in people, and to the potential for holiness in the Church's organisational structures, possible. This visionary holiness is the Church's vocation, and the vocation of all who are called to minister on its behalf, a vocation which consists of being drawn into God's purpose for transformation and healing, and drawing those they serve into that same over-arching love.