

## LOCATING CHAPLAINCY: A THEOLOGICAL NOTE

Paul Ballard

In recent years there has been an upsurge in interest in chaplaincy. It is rare not to find an advert for a post of some kind in the religious press. The range of chaplaincies has widened, especially in relation to the changing economic and social patterns suggesting that this is a way for the Churches to adjust. So we not only have industrial and urban chaplains but also chaplains in retail, sport, travel, the emergency services and elsewhere. Moreover, chaplaincy activity attracts from a wider theological spectrum than has formerly been the case. A growing number of clergy and ministers are engaged in part-time work, and initiatives come from many quarters, some very locally sponsored. Surprisingly, the literature is rather slight but there are clear signs of an emerging theological and academic interest in the field, both generically and within specialisms.

It is against this background that these reflections are offered. Such ministries have, hitherto, usually been labeled 'sector ministries', as though chaplaincies only addressed a particular narrow facet of society, in contrast to the normative ministry of the congregation or parish. If, however, chaplaincy is of growing importance then it needs to be understood as having normative status and to be more firmly grounded both theologically and structurally.

### 1. Complementary sectors

There have, of course, been long established areas of chaplaincy, notably in the military, prisons, education and health care. For various historical reasons these were regarded as having a special call on the ministry of the Church. More recently, to this was added industrial mission. This was in recognition that a whole swathe of modern life had never effectively been addressed. What this witnessed to, however, was the sectorisation of our urban industrial society. A person's life is divided into a range of segmented, if sometimes overlapping, activities. The major separation is between the domestic and the world of work, but this can be extrapolated to include other parts of life such as education, leisure, the medical, shopping and the wider family. Many a parent resents being a taxi service for the kids.

The point is that life is dispersed, and we move from one sphere to another and from one role to another. Thus the domestic has become

merely another sector, albeit, for most, the dominant one. The chaplaincy model is, therefore, not an aberration of ministry but an attempt to express the relevance of the gospel to every facet of life, each of which demands its particular response. The task of the Church is to provide an overall strategy and pastoral concern (*episcopate*). This will stress the importance of the socio-economic region for such planning. Such an approach is even more acute in a postmodern or late-modern society subject to ever more rapid change and becoming ever more fluid.

Indeed if ministry is to be free and flexible enough to respond in this way then it raises the question of 'catholicity' in an acute way. That is, how are we to envisage embodying the unity of the Church in its geographical, historical and social diversity? It is increasingly necessary to hold together a sense of belonging to the whole community of faith in the midst of new and divergent patterns of practice. How this might be achieved will, almost certainly, vary from place to place according to circumstances and could be very different from past traditions.

In this the chaplain has a very important task. Each minister or priest, in their given sphere of work, never loses their representative role. They are both the presence of the universal in the particular, ensuring that the local or special is seen in the wider context; and of the particular in the universal, giving voice to the needs and aspirations of those for whom they are responsible. This traditional function, however, will change shape as the formal structures take on board and engage with the changing patterns of Church that reflect the overlapping realities of peoples' segmented lives.

### 2. Rediscovering mission

One of the characteristics of modern or postmodern Western society might not have been the demise of religion, but it certainly has seen the renegotiation of the place of religion in society. This has meant, effectively, the privatisation of religion. No longer is there a clear, dominant 'sacred canopy'. Faith is personal or, at best, related to a cultural community. It is, therefore, optional. Different traditions, increasingly from across the world, compete in the market place of ideology and meaning. The Churches in this process, as representing a recently rejected past, have seen themselves as acutely marginalised.

There are signs, however, of a fresh reinvigoration in response to what could have been seen as a terminal situation. The Christian community has begun to engage afresh with the society that is emerging and to reassert its relevance. This has sometimes been designated, somewhat clumsily, as a shift from maintenance to mission. Congregations are being encouraged to exercise what is variously called 'integral mission' or 'community ministry'.

This holds together the witness to the faith with a concern to understand and to respond to the social needs of the wider community. It includes finding and working with allies within the community. Here the chaplaincy model has a clear appeal since it is characterised precisely by entering into and working with social structures.

This sets chaplaincy firmly within contemporary models of mission. Mission starts with a fourfold notion of the Kingdom of God as the all encompassing reality. The Kingdom is, first of all, God's ordering and preservation of creation which we receive as gift. God is in and with the world, including human society, hidden yet working out the purposes of love. Our task is to serve that purpose by creative and responsible living. Second, the inner nature of the Kingdom is found in Christ. This is the Church's gift to the world, to which we have to witness, giving direction and shape to our life together. Third, the Kingdom is process, the struggle to manifest God's intention of justice, peace and love. As those who owe allegiance to Christ, we serve him wherever the signs of the Kingdom are found. Fourth, the Kingdom has yet to come, when 'all things' are gathered into God in Christ.

This is the *missio Dei*, the work of God in the world, to which we are committed. The Church both seeks to participate in the quest for *shalom* and suffers the agonies in and with the world of sin and redemption. In and through its ministry, the Church seeks to witness to Christ as the truth of God in the world. The chaplain is caught up in this tension of the new and not yet of the Kingdom in the particularity of the immediate, working it out, with others, as circumstances demand and allow.

### 3. The chaplain as embedded

The chaplain's primary context is the world and not the Church. This is the key characteristic of such a ministry. The congregational or parish minister works mainly in, with, and from the structures of the Church. This is the base for reaching out to the community. The chaplain, on the other hand, while having a clear link into the Church, is situated in the structures of the wider society and which provides the matrix that shapes the job. This is true whether the chaplain is formally an employee of an organization, as in a hospital, or technically a guest, as in the factory, or has a more fluid, roving brief, as for a city centre. There is a constant process of negotiation as the chaplain relates to the expectations of the client and those employed by and in touch with the secular context in the name of the gospel.

The metaphor that springs to mind is one that has become familiar from recent military action. Journalists have been embedded within the units to which they have been assigned. They travel with them, live alongside them as they go about their business. But they have a special task of their own that

is different from that of the soldiers whose lives they record and whose dangers they share. In fact military chaplains have always been in such a situation. To be embedded, however, does not obliterate the primary reason for their presence. There is an inherent tension in the task, of having a dual allegiance both to the people whose lives they share and the wider point of reference they represent.

This exposes them to a whole range of pressures. There has long been a debate in industrial mission as to whether the British model of negotiated presence, gaining permission of management and unions, necessarily implies some compromise with the system which inevitably threatens to blunt the prophetic freedom to challenge it. The traditional French Protestant approach has been to work from outside the economic or industrial structures, providing a critical point of reference. But this is to start from the margins with the disadvantage of being ignored as unimportant. To work from within, however, enables the chaplain to earn respect and a voice but always as a guest.

These tensions are even more acute where the chaplain is an employee. It makes it all the more difficult to be seen to be there for everyone without fear or favour. There is the temptation simply to slip into the ways and expectations of the organisation and 'to go native', losing the critical edge. In hospitals, for instance, there is considerable management pressure to have to justify the existence of the chaplaincy service and thus to tend to identify with the criteria of judgment required by a cash strapped service.

Positioned between two sets of expectations there is the dilemma of 'serving two masters' (Matthew 6.24). Ministry has to be seen to be relevant. In a society that all too readily dismisses religion, there is an obligation to find points of connection. One is therefore pulled in two directions; either into the safe but seemingly shrinking ground of the Church; or out into the world with the threat of more and more attenuated links with the Church. That this latter danger is real is reinforced by anecdotal evidence that chaplaincy offers some an alternative ministry for those who find the constraints of the ecclesiastical institutions restrictive.

This is, of course, precisely the tension of the incarnation – of being in the world so entirely that there is identity, and yet being 'not of this world' so as to be free to serve it. In John's Gospel it is clear that Jesus is fully in the world (flesh; 1.14), yet is free from the world, not enmeshed in its chains (18.36). Only thus is he able to overcome the world (16.33). He is the servant of the world because he is the servant of the Kingdom. Yet this is the Jesus who is born into his people (1.11), lives with them, prays with them, suffers with them. Yet there is a sense of hiddenness. The inner nature or the primary relationship is expressed in and through the everyday. There

was no theophany in the expected sense (Luke 7.19). Those who encountered him could turn away (John 6.66-71), pass by on the other side or question his integrity (Mark 2.6). Both Jesus and those who respond live by faith, that is by trust and hope. The wisdom of the Kingdom is discovered as it is lived out (Luke 7.25-35).

Paul, in a sense, takes this a step further, becoming 'all things to all people' (1 Corinthians 9.23), being their slave so that he is available to all, a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles, yet under Christ's law'. Such, indeed, he asserts, is the lot of all Christians. We have to live in society as servants of Christ. The chaplain's dilemma is, therefore, not peculiar but only makes explicit what is ever true. Even slaves and masters can live together and serve each other in Christ (Colossians 3.22-4.1). Even the slave of a pagan master can begin to discover the liberty of being with Christ in the midst of duty. And that is where the chaplain is, with those who necessarily live in the hurly-burly of life, caught up in the constraints, hope, joys, fears and dangers of the market place and the city.

#### 4. The chaplain as public theologian

Part of the current recovery of mission is the revived interest in what is currently called 'public theology'. A Google search on the web throws up immediately four British sites. These are: Theos, an ecumenically sponsored research centre, arising out of the Bible Society's initiative on the Bible and culture; the Public Theology Division of the Evangelical Alliance; the Centre for Public Theology, a joint project of the University and the William Temple Foundation in Manchester; and the Centre for Theology and Public Issues, New College, Edinburgh. There are also other centres with similar aims, often working in specific fields such as business or the arts. The churches, too, are engaged in addressing contemporary social concerns. This is a renewal of an important tradition that goes back at least to William Temple in the 1920s and which has an honourable history. Such initiatives endeavour to set up a dialogue between key social issues and the wisdom and insights of the Bible and the Christian tradition in such a way as to offer contributions to the public debate. This is done through publications, conferences, lectures, seminars and research projects. Useful and proper as they are such contributions tend to be made from the Church or Christian community to the wider society.

There has to be another level. Public theology has to be worked out in the abrasive rub of everyday affairs where people, Christians and others, make decisions, bear burdens, agonise, become frustrated, set up great enterprises, go about their business and 'seek the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29.6). It is the chaplain who is found at the key point. It can, therefore be argued that the chaplain is the pivotal public theologian.

John de Gruchy, talking about the practical theologian, who for him is the congregational minister, captures this brilliantly. The practical theologian, which must include the public theologian, is the one who works out the theological reality in the particular.

The real theological task is . . . to enable the community of faith critically to understand the faith and to express answers to the question: Who is God? Where is God to be found today and what does this God require of us here and now? . . . It is the practical theologian . . . who has to help the community day by day and week by week discover answers in relation to the praxis and witness of the Church in the world and so help it find the direction which will enable it to fulfill its task. (de Gruchy, 55)

In relation to the public theologian, two points can be added. The chaplain, in the midst of the market place, asks the same question but processes it differently. The point is to find how to articulate the insight, perspective, and challenge in such a way as to make it accessible to those with whom we are dealing, placed outside the world of the faith community. This may seldom be in theological language or even in faith terms. The 'word in season' (Proverbs 15.23) will be designed to stimulate the right reaction in whatever way is appropriate. To do this the public theologian will need four resources: a sound, creative theological mind; a comprehension, theoretical and practical, of the context which is being served; a support system where the processes of reflection can happen, testing out possibilities; and, above all, a creative and sensitive imagination that can listen, pick up vibes and respond empathetically. Only thus is it possible to work, to use Joe Oldham's terminology, on the 'frontier' between faith and the world in which we find ourselves.

Second, this is essentially the prophetic task. The prophet is required to read the signs of the times in the light of the fundamental revelation and to understand that revelation as it both illuminates and is illumined by the pressures and demands of the world. This is the gift the prophet brings: to shed meaning and light on a situation so that those who act can make decisions that serve the Kingdom. The prophet is above all a positive presence, representing the possibility of hope and change, claiming that it does not always have to be as it is but that we can struggle for the future. To do this, however, the prophet lives among the people, sharing in their hopes and fears, and in the debates that are part of communal living. The prophet, therefore, will be one voice among many, endeavouring to catch the ear of those around, often ignored and sometime persecuted. But the prophet is not there for his or her own sake but for the sake of the people and the world God loves (John 3.16).

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## A RIGHT TO BE HERE: REFLECTIONS ON IMPERFECTION

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Some 20 years ago in Latvia and Eastern Europe, when the liberation movements that led to the formation of new independent states were born, we were full of enthusiasm and hope. Tired of the violence and ideological oppression of foreign occupation, we believed that, with the renewal of independence and the formation of a free state, we would leave everything wretched and unjust behind us. Freedom was at first something intoxicating for us – being able to express our thoughts, to speak about subjects long forbidden, to come together freely in certain kinds of organisations. This was especially significant for us clergymen, who in Soviet times were sorely oppressed and confined within the four walls of our churches.

But freedom brought an unexpected side-effect: it brought to light many things about us which in Soviet times had been hidden from view. Freedom let it all come out – not just lofty ideas, but also selfishness, egoism, exploitation of others. Disappointment followed. At first, as always happens, we focused our disappointment on other people – on the politicians, the businessmen, and our own neighbours. But then, thinking more carefully about all that had happened, many of us grew disappointed in ourselves as well. Suddenly, and quite clearly, we discovered undesirable qualities in ourselves, qualities quite difficult for us to control. So once again, we have returned to those questions which have occupied so many people in modern times: why, even in a free and democratic society, are human beings still not capable of being good, honourable, unselfish – in a word, *perfect*? Why is it not possible to make human beings better? It seems that all of us who have tried to make ourselves better have come to see that this is possible only up to a certain point, after which we make no further progress. People start improving but then come up against an invisible wall, so to speak. Why are human beings like this?

But wait: do not religions, and Christianity in particular, claim that human beings can actually change?<sup>1</sup> Or are all these religions just so many fantasies, illusions, and superstitions that have no connection with real life? Does religion or belief in God really change human beings, or does it merely comfort

<sup>1</sup> The well known words of Jesus, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48) are often misunderstood in the sense that Jesus is commanding human beings to achieve the impossible – to be like God! In fact, as the scriptural context shows (Jesus has just been speaking about loving enemies and renouncing anger – qualities which human beings are quite incapable of), what Jesus is saying can be achieved only in communion with God. The Greek word used here, *teleios*, means not just 'perfect' but also 'whole' or 'complete.' Hence,

*Continued overleaf*