

EDITORIAL – I LOVE MY CHURCH

Paul Beasley-Murray

The last full-length sermon I preached in 1999 was also the first I had preached after having been off work for a month with acute back-pain. I wonder how you react to the way in which I began my sermon the first Sunday I was back. Can you identify with its feelings, or do you think it was it 'over the top'?

"It has been four weeks since I last stood here in front of you. The last time I preached was on Sunday 14 November when I stood on one leg and tried to preach on the words of Jesus, 'I am the door'. I just about made it. After the service I went home and collapsed - the pain in my back and down my leg was just too much. I just could not carry on, and our senior deacon that evening had to read the sermon I had prepared

"I confess that I have not found these last four weeks easy. Apart from the time when I was drugged up to the eyeballs with valium and morphine I have been in a good deal of pain - indeed, if the truth be told, the pain is still with me and I am told is likely to remain with me into the New Year.

"However, the greatest pain for me has not been physical but emotional. It has been the pain of separation from you, my brothers and sisters, who make up our church. Without exception the most difficult day has been Sunday. Last Sunday morning, for instance, I wept buckets for no reason other than that I could not be with you that morning. Some people may be glad of a Sunday off church. For me that has not been the case. It has been a devastating experience to be at home and not to be with you....

"So here I am - back at least in part. Although much improved, I am still on painkillers. I have been told that I cannot drive for the time being. In one sense I should not be preaching today. I confess that I have not been able to prepare for this morning as I would have liked - indeed, one of my friends did her utmost to dissuade me from not preaching. 'Come, if you must, and simply be part of the congregation. Let your associate preach instead'. But I felt that I could not endure another Sunday of not being able to bring God's Word to you, his people. For the fact is that I have not simply

missed you - I have also missed being able to fulfil my calling amongst you...."

As I re-read the beginning of that sermon, I realise that some readers of *Ministry Today* may well imagine that I must be the kind of minister who cannot ever let go of his church. Yet this is not entirely true. I have no difficulty in taking three weeks off for a decent summer holiday, nor indeed did I experience any difficulty in taking a two-month sabbatical the year before last. True, I was glad to be back, but I did not ache with longing as I did when I was ill with my back problem.

Unless there are underlying reasons perceptible perhaps only to a psychiatrist, I believe the basic reason for my emotional statement that Sunday was that I truly love God's church. Not that our church is necessarily always that loveable. If the truth be told, in recent years we have had more than our fair share of difficult relationships and difficult behaviour. Yet, in spite of all these difficulties, I am still in love with God's people.

On reflection is not love for the people of God at the heart of the calling of every pastor? In this respect I believe that Derek Tidball in his introduction to his recent book, *Builders And Fools: Leadership The Bible Way* (IVP, Leicester, 1999) has something significant to say. There he reminds his readers that pastoral ministry is essentially about loving relationships, not about legal contracts. He writes: "Most Christians would readily see that a marriage entered into on the basis of a contract, stipulating the responsibilities of each partner, the financial arrangements and other minutiae, and which anticipated what would happen in the event of a break-up, was somewhat lacking. The element of love, of self-giving to one's partner, of growing devotion and commitment, of promise to be together 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer', of trust and of adventure, is missing. Marriage is a covenant, not a contract; a relationship, not a business. The same is true between pastor and church".

I believe that Derek Tidball is right. In accepting the call to my church I have entered into a covenant, based on love, with my church. In turn, they too have entered into a covenant, based on love, with me! Indeed, as a Baptist and therefore as one who espouses the gathered nature of the church, I believe that covenant relationships lie at the heart of church life in general.

Precisely because as ministers we have a covenant relationship with our churches, our ministry cannot be a nine-to-five job, five days a week. Precisely because of this covenant relationship I am committed to love my church - whatever! As it so happens, my feelings toward my church run along the same line as that of my commitment. For me, in spite of all the occasional difficulties, there is no greater privilege than to be minister of the central Baptist church in Chelmsford.

How do you feel about your ministry, I wonder?

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FROM FEELING TO MEANING - THE DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS OF WORSHIP AS THE CONTEXT FOR PASTORAL CARE

By Simon Reynolds

During the past decade, there has been a growing interest in the relationship between liturgy and pastoral care. Much recent writing has highlighted the value of incorporating insights from the human sciences into the content and presentation of liturgy. This development, it could be argued, has contributed to a loss of recognition that, in many Christian traditions, worship is the primary embodiment of doctrine. If worship is to function effectively, both as the context for pastoral care, and as a starting point for mission, it requires a bold and creative reaffirmation of this doctrinal foundation.

The church's worship is one of the defining characteristics of its own self-identity. In the dynamic inter-play of language heard and prayed, the character and identity of the ecclesial community is shaped. ¹⁴⁹ The liturgy is the environment where the hopes and hurts of human beings are caught up in the salvific action of God, where personal and public stories are brought together and made sense of within a framework of theology and history. It is the arena

¹⁴⁹ See W Taylor Stevenson "Lex Ordandi Lex Credendi" in ed. Sykes, Booty & Knight, *The Study of Anglicanism*, London, SPCK 1988 (Rev 1998) 188.