

A Theological Culture for Ministry Education

TCTS Commencement Address 2017

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Mark 10.28-31

Baptism and the 'unfolding discovery of an unexpected vocation.'

'Look we have left everything to follow you.' This verse and those that immediately follow in St Mark's gospel, are a fitting backdrop to an address reflecting on ministry education and formation. The statement and Jesus response seems to imply that maybe there was an unspoken underlying question: 'What *more* do you want of me?' This is probably our natural response when we, like the disciples, think we are simply being asked to add something more to what *we* want to be doing. But actually, what Jesus is inviting here in this brief section from Mark's gospel is not an invitation to do a bit here and there for God, as if to help him out. If this was the case, then naturally we would end up bemoaning and begrudging our time: 'What *more* do you want of us?'

However, Jesus wants our life, that is to put all we are and all we do consciously within God's presence, into the hands of the enabling God, and to see transformation for the better. Even the good things we do, people we love, relationships we cherish, into these these hands, for blessing to mysteriously arise. So this is an invitation, we might say, to 'let go and let God!'

In relation to discipleship or our shaping as Christians this is more about re-birth, new creation, becoming new persons and the journey following is not about giving spare bits of time here and there but openness to God; it's about allowing transformation, becoming new persons and having our character formed by Christ. This is why we refer to baptism, that experience, remembered or not, but still a reality in which God met us in Christ.

Baptism is an action that reminds us about and enables our 'letting go and letting God.' If we don't live into that kind of baptism then of course we are going to be bemoaning that Christ is asking more of us on top of everything else we do; an add-on rather than a life-lived.

Now in this address I actually want to say something about a theological culture, a vision if you will, around which all we do toward ministry education and formation is shaped and developed. But I hope you realise that my brief comment so far, drawn as it is from Mark 10, is actually the ground within which all Christian Ministry Education is rooted.

This sense of 'letting go and letting God' actually arises for me from a comment made by David Tracy, the American Roman Catholic theologian, some 30 years ago. Tracy, but many other theologians of all backgrounds also, spoke in the light of Western modern theology's failure to break out of its cloistered Euro-centrism, this theology's infusion within Western culture, beguiled by thoughts of progress and technological advance. Rather than deliver human salvation, this thinking was threatening life as we know on this planet. So, Tracy argued, we have to "allow for the return of the eschatological God disrupting all continuity and confidence," and learn to 'let God be God again.' This was not an abstract thought of Tracy, but an argument about our need to attend to the crucified One and to the Spirit; attend to those others in our midst, especially the poor and the marginalised, whom we ignore at the peril of human flourishing more generally.¹ Although Tracy writes from 3 decades' past, he spoke of the twin tasks of the church and theology today, the prophetic task – naming injustices and meeting human need - and the contemplative one – attending to the mind of Christ and being shaped accordingly.

It is, I believe, in this space, between the church's prophetic ministry and its contemplative life, that we find our vocation both as women and men, and as local and diocesan communities. This space, it strikes me, is a place of tension and I suspect the more we live into our baptism, the more we take up calls to leadership, lay or ordained, the more this tension is known. But it makes us realise more and more our need to 'let God be God.' There is that lovely Collect for Peace in the *Book of Common Prayer* which speaks of knowing God as eternal life and that to serve God "is perfect freedom." These sentiments are also expressed in the words of a hymn which says "living is to love God; serving God to know God's freedom." This space I think is a baptismal space, in which, as St Augustine

¹ *On Naming the Present*, (New York: Concilium/SCM, 1994), 43, 21.

suggested, there is a “complex unfolding discovery of an unexpected vocation.”² This is a theological vision for life and ministry. As Rowan Williams writes, drawing on Augustine:

I do not know myself: but God knows me. God’s knowledge of me is available not as a picture I can grasp or as a piece of information, but in the form of trust in God’s love – faith, in other words. ... grounded in and enabled by the history of Christ.³

The Culture of Ministry Education.

What then of the resulting unfolding culture of ministry education and formation arising from this theological vision? Let me outline five aspects of this culture which for me can shape our strategy, programs and practice of ministry education here at TCTS.

First, to speak of Christian ministry education and formation is first and foremost to give attention to God’s enabling presence through Christ and the Spirit. For the church in the early centuries education shaped its life and mission as it saw itself as a lifelong learning community. But it was not any kind of learning community, it was as Cyril of Jerusalem wrote, “Christ’s school.” It was a school of wisdom under the Spirit, wherein the presence of Christ went hand in hand in the pursuit of truth and goodness. Education had to do with a ‘drawing out’ or a drawing forth, and in religious terms it was a drawing out of the image of God in people. Ministry formation in the early church drew on parallels from the surrounding culture and gained insight from the ancient tradition of *paideia*. In seeking to bring forth the image of God in people, it was a practice more like “midwifery”⁴ rather than dogmatic imposition of propositional content, or predetermined ministerial shape. For this reason, we can speak of a culture of ministry education or formation wherein vocation is discovered from within the baptized community but never in isolation, as I will say below, from the incarnate God in Christ in the world today.

Therefore, perhaps simplistically, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus and listen to his Spirit. Learning to read scripture is surely central here, and more needs to be said about this than I

² Rowan Williams, *On Augustine*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 14.

³ *On Augustine*, 14.

⁴ Francis Young, ‘Paideia – What Can We Learn from the First Four Centuries?’ in David F. Ford and Dennis L. Stamps (eds), *Essentials of Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 229–231.

am going to here. Reading scripture and reflecting together on the biblical narrative is our core activity. Anglicans need to work this so as to equipping the people of God to be fluent, able, and intelligent readers of this story of Israel and of Jesus, and the early church. This cannot be underlined enough, and this reading can never be done in isolation from the people and events that surround us.

There is a vulnerability in this looking to Jesus, not least of all because it seems naïve. But eyes fixed on Jesus as the place for our knowledge of God, is as I've already suggested from Rowan Williams, not a vision to which we can jump too quickly or indeed unaided. God in Christ is not fully graspable as 'a set picture or a piece of information.' We can too easily shape Jesus into our image, mould him through the eyes of our experience and our culture, including our church culture. As Rowan Williams again tells us, drawing on Augustine, we are ever in danger of short changing ourselves with "a *premature* and limited account" of identity and sense of self and of "a reduction of joy for which we are destined."⁵ And in short changing ourselves we also do it doubly for others.

Attentiveness, is then for me the second cultural virtue to be inculcated within ministry Education and formation. This speaks of spiritual disciplines and practice where we seek the enabling presence of the Spirit, the grace of God in Christ. The rigours of theological education, the stretching of minds through academic study or theological reflection in small group parish experience, also feeds into this learned Spirit-shaped attentiveness. David Tracy alludes to Simone Weil who never thought of the studying languages as a narrow task separated from broader sense of learning. For Weil, what mattered was not that she arrived at the right translation, but that 'through making ourselves wholly available to something outside ourselves, we hone our facility of attention, without which we can neither pray nor be present to those who suffer.'⁶ Or as Thomas Merton once wrote, reading is an act of homage to God, 'an act of humility and reverence towards other[s] who are the instruments by which God communicated ...truth to us.'⁷ But I am also thankful to my colleague Stephen Burns who reminded me that George Herbert the priest, scholar and poet, whose life we celebrate today, also said something about Ministry not happening if we stay in our

⁵ Williams, again drawing from Augustine, *On Augustine*, 8.

⁶ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), pp.105-116.

⁷ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (London: Burns and Oats, 1958)., 52.

libraries. And this is true, learned focus on God must surely lead to focus on ministering in the parish, in the school, on the street.

This is a fitting reminder that attentiveness to neighbour or text, or contemplative meditation practices are not isolated from the God who is found in the people and places around us, especially as we consciously engage in ministry as members of the community baptised into Christ. Our vision in Ministry Education is to continue to draw on approaches to liturgy and spirituality from around the diverse, multi-cultural Anglican Communion. But in the face of a diverse and multicultural cohort of women and men who seek formation with us at TCTS, openness to the Spirit will mean attending to the rich Christian tradition of spiritual disciplines and liturgical life, as well as being willing to experiment and make mistakes.

These comments lead on to highlighting the third aspect of our culture of ministry education. The deep learning we want to inculcate as formative and transformative will, by its very nature, always engages with others and so with the purposes of God for human life in the world.⁸ Education is God involving because it is world involving, and that statement could be a very fitting aphorism for us. We will as teachers and learners increasingly and intentionally encounter a diversity of people and ministries in parishes, school, mission agencies and so on. And if current trends continue we will need to hone the ability of church leaders not only to give and account of the hope that is within them, but, because of this hope, also stand up and speak out for those of different faith and social grouping. We are going to have to form leaders, ordained and lay who are going to be able to engage with a diverse community in the realm of ideas, politics and service. This will be a living out of our baptism as perhaps never known before, at least in our lifetime. Through these engaged community ministries we will find God afresh, as the “complex unfolding discovery of an unexpected vocation.” This is a huge ask, one that we at TCTS can not do alone. We will need to draw on our partners in church, academy and society. But we will need to shape our programs in ways that help us all as learners and teachers engage with our world.

I have in the past spoken of my own experiences of doing street retreats in Kings Cross in Sydney and facing situations and peoples not normally encountered. In small but real ways

⁸ Daniel Hardy, *Finding the Church* (London: SCM, 2001), 174.

these experiences were experiences of conversion for me and others who took part. I translated these retreats into work-place entreaty in a smaller rural centre and similarly saw men and women experience something of that 'unfolding discovery of an unexpected vocation.' A recent article in the *Anglican Theological Review* told a similar story. A young man not long an ordained Anglican priest went to work with people who eked out a living on rubbish tips somewhere in central America. He spoke of his discovery of joy, human friendship and community in ways hitherto unknown to him in church life. He named this time as his conversion to Christ. Those who come for ministry education deserve no less an encounter with God.

To speak more formally of a curriculum for ministry education is to speak of including practices such as worship, prayer, contemplation, and study, practices that hone attentiveness or habits of deep listening. But we also need to find ways to help another generation of leaders in the church gain wisdom enough not to ape ministry schemes and delivery methods that in themselves expound a church culture that avoids change or stifles conversion. In this process, I do not have answers, but I realise we need to stay in conversation not only with our churches but with our society, and its institutions of human learning. Sometimes we need to move sideways and even backwards, to be able to find the leading of God. As one author commented, often it is in the accidental or unexpected that we find the wisdom and insight of God.⁹

Fourth, our vision for ministry education will need time. The culture of ministry education, if it is to have long lasting effects through practices of attentiveness, growth in wisdom, encounter with many contexts and people, is one that understands something of the *timing of God (kairos)*. Impatience is part of the culture we breath; it affects us all. But theology and formation is a slow discipline, it is communal and we are part of a marathon and not a sprint, as Martin Percy reminds us, and we may often do better to help the postulant or pastoral trainee to make haste slowly.

This is especially the case because one of the great changes in theological education in recent decades is the fact that most women and men come as part-timers to ministry

⁹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination* (London: Ashgate, 1991), 115 in Martin Percy. 'Sacred Segacity: Formation and Training for Ministry in a Church of England Seminary', *Anglican Theological Review*, 90:2, 2008, 292.

education with the need to juggle work, family and travel. Yet too often there is the sense that the actual time that can be given to ministry formation and education requires pressure cooker learning or a 'boot camp' mentality given that the need is so urgent. In such circumstance we are then all guilty of saying with the disciples in Mark, 'What *more do you want of me?*' This is no way to help lay and ordained leaders develop as ministers of the gospel. The challenge for those seeking ministry education, for colleges and for sponsoring church bodies and hierarchy is to attend to virtues that build ministerial and priestly character rather than extend the surface mentality of the ticking of boxes, or getting caught up in the instrumentalism of market driven culture, 'training' rather than education, formation and transformation. So we have to go on asking about how we build in opportunities for 'pace, solidarity and connectedness' rather than 'haste, energy and apparent achievement;' for 'resonance with our past rather than' always looking for relevance and progress.¹⁰

Finally, though a lot more can be said and practicalities outlined, ministry education and formation will unfold in small steps, it is only attainable with the above named culture of Christ. But we are part of the Body of Christ, St Paul reminds us, and we follow the enabling God. There is a rich plurality of life that our church needs to encourage by an openness to God and neighbour, as I want to keep asserting. We are part of richly endowed academies – the University of Divinity and Trinity College, the University of Melbourne. By endowment I do not reference financial wherewithal, though we are very grateful for this also! I speak of the endowment with a sense of the riches of education and learning, of ability to engage with academy and society, and so we must. We must also mentor members of the people of God, especially our ordained and lay leaders to engage socially, intellectually and personally with the polis especially in the light of our societies increasingly alarming response to refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, people of other faiths, but especially first Australian. This is a big call people of God to their ministers, again highlighting our central need to be educated in ways that focus on attentiveness to Christ in neighbour and in prayer.

Many have spoken about the changing conditions of belief in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Charles Taylor points out that in the modern period God is no longer the

¹⁰ Percy, 'Sacred Segacity'. 291.

framework of our world and for many God is only one element of human life.¹¹ For many who arrive in Australia as immigrants this is not the case; God remains more of a framework for their lives, thus our need to be able to engage in the process of valuing diversity while being confident about our own Christian theology.

I think that the kind of culture that will undergird the future of a *Ministry Education Centre* here at TCTS, is something of the kind I have suggested above. It represents to my mind an important stream of Anglican ecclesiology and ministry formation with which we can sit confidently. Many in parishes, schools and other mission agencies are looking to colleges like ours to inculcate this kind of gospel confidence. The elements of the cultural vision that I have outlined, are not new; they are I believe commonly held by the Anglicanism known and practiced around our world. This culture of ministry education I hope speaks of broad ecclesial credentials, an open minded theological outlook, creativity, and willingness to take risks as together we seek God as teachers and learners.

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¹¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007).