

T. Austin-Sparks:

What is a priest? He is not an official or a member of a religious caste, but a man who withstands death and ministers life. The one all-inclusive issue of the ages, the great purpose of God from eternity to eternity, can be described in New Testament language as eternal life. As soon as sin entered the world then death ensued, and so men needed an altar and the shedding of blood in order that sin could be countered by righteousness and death be overcome by divine life. Together with the altar there emerged the personal activity of a man called a priest, and so, as time went on, such service grew and grew until it developed into an elaborate priestly ministry.

Death as an active power could only be arrested, nullified and removed by having its ground of sin adequately dealt with, hence the priestly ministry of righteousness, the perfect righteousness of incorruptible life expressed by the blood of the offering. Israel was to be a nation of priests, a people based and grounded on God's own righteousness, and therefore able to face death and defeat it. The Church was called to take up this ministry. The Lord Jesus Himself foretold this by saying: "the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43). Peter later explained that redeemed sinners have entered into the spiritual calling, being the "chosen nation", the "royal priesthood" which has to undertake the great vocation of being God's ministers of life in the earth.

So we find that as members of Christ's body we have a relationship to Him, the great High Priest, which is analogous to that between Aaron and his sons who shared his work of priesthood. In the letter to the Hebrews, which deals with this subject, we have a kind of New Testament Leviticus. In this epistle believers are addressed as sons as well as "holy brethren", as though Christ regards us as His sons - "I and the children whom God has given me" (Hebrews 2:13). Through us, therefore, as members of Christ, the great high priestly work in heaven is to find expression here on earth. If we ask what is the significance of the Lord's continuous work as High Priest, the answer is to set life over against death, to nullify the operation and reign of spiritual death. The Church's great conflict is with spiritual death, and the more spiritual a man becomes, the more he is aware of the awful reality of this battle with the evil power of death.

No priest or Levite of the Old Testament was ever tempted to become lyrical on this subject or to talk in poetical language as though death were some sort of friend. Oh no, they knew death to be the great enemy of God and of all God's interests. When the Scriptures speak of death as the last enemy, they not only mean that it is the last on the list but that it is the consummate enemy, the inclusive expression of all enmity. The effect of priesthood is illustrated again and again in the Word of God. We observe death breaking in because of sin, and then God intervening with His answer of life by means of blood sacrifice. The blood speaks of an accepted righteousness, and by means of it, the priest was able to meet death, counter it and minister life. Finally we are told of the Lord Jesus, who met death in the concentration of all its enmity, overthrew it by means of the perfect sacrifice of His own life's blood, and then entered upon His priestly work of ministering life to believers.

The priest is a man of authority though this is spiritual and not ecclesiastical. He has power with God. The apostle John speaks of the case of one who has sinned a sin which is not unto death, and he says: "He shall ask life..." for him (1 John 5:16). This reference discloses that a believer who is standing on the ground of righteousness by faith through the blood of Jesus, can exercise the power of priesthood on behalf of an erring brother, and so minister life to him. Surely there is no ministry more needed on earth today than such a vitalising ministry. If we minister truths which do not issue in life, then we are wasting our time. God has not commissioned us to be mere imparters of information about divine things or teachers of morals; He has loosed us from our sins so that we might be ministers of life to others by virtue of priestly authority. We live in a world where death reigns. Daily there are multitudes being swept away by a tide of spiritual death. Why? Because of unrighteousness. What is needed is the activity of those who will accept their priestly responsibilities, both asking life for others and offering them that life through the gospel. We must minister Christ. Not mere doctrines about Him; not mere words or commandments; but the vital impact of Christ in terms of life. So every believer is called to stand between the dead and the living giving the answer of Christ to the activities of Satan.

No wonder that the kingdom of Satan was at war with Israel, for the presence of this nation on a right relationship with God proclaimed effectively that sin and death do not reign universally in God's world, but they have been met and overcome by the power of a righteous and incorruptible life. In the end Israel lost this testimony and so lost the priestly ministry. The Church was then brought in to take it up, being no longer a localised people in one land but a spiritual community scattered in all the earth, a people whose supreme calling is to maintain God's victory over death according to the testimony of Jesus. And what is the testimony of Jesus? It is the testimony of the triumph of life over death. He Himself so described it to John: "I am he that

liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and I have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:18).

This testimony was deposited in the Church, and immediately the disciples presented it powerfully among the nations. Alas! In many respects the Church is now failing in its priestly vocation. This vital element of victorious life seems to be lacking. The letters at the beginning of the book of Revelation show that Christ was not satisfied with the churches' many good activities, zealous works, correct teaching, patient persistence in orthodoxy. He sought to call them back to their true task of demonstrating the power of His overcoming life in the face of every challenge. What ministry do we want? To be running around taking meetings, giving addresses, supporting Christian work? All this may be included, but it is of little value if it does not fit into the context of priestly warfare against death, the bringing in of the powerful impact of Christ's victorious life to meet death's challenge.

The book of the Revelation makes it plain that such a testimony provokes the animosity of Satan, but such enmity should be a compliment to us, for it means that our lives are really counting for God. The day when you or I are no longer involved in the spiritual battle will be a bad day, for it will mean that we have lost our true vocation and are no longer providing any real challenge to spiritual death but are failing in this matter of priestly ministry. On the other hand, the painful antagonism of the powers of evil may be a clear proof that we are truly serving as priests.

Test everything by life. The life that is victorious over sin. The life which delivers from bondage, especially the bondage of fear. The life which expresses itself in terms of love for needy sinners. Not only does John encourage us to ask for life, he assures us that in answer to such prayer God will give it - "...he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death". We must not fail in our priestly ministry.