

‘PROFESSIONAL CHRISTIAN FAILURE’: FAITH AND MY WORK

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I’m going to let you in on a little secret this evening, but I’m going to tell you my little secret ONLY on the promise that none of you breathe a word of it to the bishop.

My secret is this: I hate telling people I meet that I am a priest. I know it’s not supposed to be that way – that I’m supposed to want to tell the world, that I’m supposed to think this is the best life ever, the most wonderful thing to be doing with my life, and that I’m so deeply grateful, humbled and full of thanks for the chance to serve God in this way that I am bursting at the opportunity to talk about it. But, no, it doesn’t feel like that to me.

While I was at theological college training to be a priest, people I met found it rather fascinating, endearing, intriguing to meet someone who was at vicar factory. But now I’m ordained, I find a different set of quite predictable reactions.

With some people you can see this inner alarm siren going off with big red flashing warning lights; you see they want to turn and sprint in the other direction to flee the religious nutcase, and indeed very occasionally I get a ream of angry verbal abuse and off the person trots, having directed all their hurt and vengeance about God and the church onto me.

Others develop an unusual and slightly dreamy interest in it all, want to know what I do and how I got there, what’s the difference between a vicar and a priest, and whether archdeacons still exist. Many of this sort of person is assuming I must have heard a voice from heaven at some point and live with some deep sense of purpose that few others manage to find; or they want to think that I have an in-depth knowledge of the full variety of Vatican smoke signals, and that at least half of my Facebook friend list consists of nuns.

As nice as it is to be a subject of enthusiastic intrigue, I can usually tell that this sort of person has made a sudden mental leap from treating me as just another person, to someone who lives in another world they don’t know and functions on a different plane, a stranger to learn about, but never get to know.

And then, perhaps worse, there is the reaction of sheer polite indifference; niceties are exchanges, but there is an awkwardness, a quiet fear that at some point in the conversation I will start quoting Isaiah, or ask them if they know Jesus.

I hate telling people I meet that I’m a priest, and of course most of the time I don’t have to say anything at all – the collar talks for me, and the projections begin unannounced. Yet I can see in everything that I hate about telling people I’m a priest, a glimmer of all my greatest fears about myself and my faith and what you might call my work.

Take first the person who wants to run in the other direction, with or without a tirade of anger about God. I live with the painful reality of working within and for an institution that fails and hurts people, that has been responsible, not just for negligence of, but for the sponsorship of racism, sexism, homophobia, slavery, colonialism and abuse, and for protecting itself from scrutiny and accountability. To say that the Church is a place of failed and failing human beings makes it all sound more romantic than it deserves – we are not always talking of well-meaning ignorance, but sometimes of blind, wilful and continuing cruelty and harm in the name of a God of love.

The Church, despite all its claims and aspirations for love and peace and healing, has been capable of an unbelievable degree of hurtfulness and pain. I am all too aware that I work for just about the only remaining workplace in this country where I might lose my job were I to marry another man; I work for an institution where a small room full of white grey-haired apparently straight cis-males, ironically wearing fuschia dresses and large jewellery, make decisions about opportunities for women in the church, and declare judgements on the best ways forward for recognising the journeys of transgender Christians. I cannot afford to forget the person who wants to shout all of that vehemently in my face, because I should want to shout all of that at myself in the mirror each morning, and live and work until change has come.

I need also, though, not to run away from that person who sees me as a kind of saintly figure, who expects I heard or saw God at some point, and that I live now free of doubts and full of the purpose and presence of God at every moment. It may not surprise you that I see very little, if any, of that sort of priest in myself. Marvellous for Jesus to have had voices from heaven, and Simeon and Anna sweeping him up with heraldic pronouncements over him; but if I'm quite honest, most of the time I live with an abiding sense of uncertainty about what I'm doing and why – and I suspect I'm not unusual in that, either as a priest or as a human being.

The priest is no superhero, imbued with an extraordinary capacity to give and love and hope. Monday mornings feel the same to us as to anyone; we still occasionally have the desire to smash plates against the wall after a bad meeting; we still think of giving up sometimes, of doing something else; and, yes, we're still as clueless and fragile in the face of death as the next person, still short of answers, all the more aware that people expect us to have the answers, and we can be left feeling vaguely fraudulent whenever we attempt at something towards an answer in the face of irreconcilable suffering and loss.

But when that person stares me in the face and expects that I'm on some plane that they've just not reached, I am reminded that I am indeed there to bear witness to something about life and God and hope and healing that I have somehow glimpsed myself; something about humanity and grace and wonder.

I am no expert, no, and I am no brainwashing merchant – but it is helpful to be jolted out of the shy, steadily apologetic mode I too often fall into, and to be asked to, as it says in the first letter of St Peter, give reason for the hope that I have. As a priest, I spend rather a lot of my time and energy inhabiting and exploring notions like forgiveness, fear, grace, glory, meaning, that lie at the very heart of the reality of human experience, whoever you are – and pretty much everything about my job and role and purpose is about helping people to articulate those aspects of their lives, to grow into them, to go deeper, to live bigger, to journey from fear to love; not because I'm immune to that journey myself, or am some kind of professional expert on human flourishing, and certainly not because I'm some sort of sorted saint, but because I live much of my life in that gap between failure and hope, between pain and joy.

It is that coincidence of pain and joy that strikes us in the Candlemas reading, as Christ is presented in the temple. He is, Simeon says, at once the glory and light and salvation of God for the whole world, he is everything that Simeon has been longing and looking for, praying for. Yet Christ will also be the stumbling block – destined for the rising and falling of many, the one whose rejection will reveal the hearts of others, and whose purpose will lead to Mary's great pain – her soul pierced as it were with a sword – the utter tragedy, that I have already had to witness too many times, of a parent burying their child.

This is no Jesus Christ Superstar – this is glory and hope that involves walking through the midst of unbearable pain and suffering, and indeed that is somehow revealed only in the deepest sorrow and dejection of Christ flogged, mocked and crucified.

In a sense the polite indifference, the apathy, that I sometimes meet in others and so frequently in myself is the greatest demon of all – far worse than the righteous anger, or the overreached expectations; because apathy numbs us to the brokenness and devastation that we sometimes encounter in our lives, and stunts our capacity to hope and imagine. There is no path to healing that bypasses tending the wounds we pick up and the fractures we cause. There is no ignoring the fears that simmer underneath the surface, if we want to live free of them. And if we are ignorant and dishonest about the failures and fractures we live with – just as if I am ignorant or dishonest with myself about the fears and inconsistencies I feel I often live with – then there is no chance for hope, there is no prospect of living something real and true and lightening. We cannot be afraid of ourselves, or ashamed of ourselves, if we hope also to be ourselves and love ourselves and give ourselves to others.

Amen.