

AN IMAGE OF THE CHAPLAIN

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FORWARD

When we were requested to present an essay on an “Image of the Chaplain”, as a major assignment of our Clinical Pastoral Education Course, my heart warmed. Not because I knew at that time what I was going to write; much less, how I would express my thoughts. My heart warmed because Jesus used metaphors to symbolize and make plain some aspect of our Christian life and witness. He spoke of the ‘Good Shepherd’, the ‘sheep’, the ‘sheep gate’, and the ‘sheepfold’; the ‘husbandman’ and the ‘vine’; ‘light’ and ‘salt’.

Symbols have also been used to demonstrate the inner feelings and convictions of the heart and soul and mind that man’s lips could not adequately express.

The use of metaphors to symbolize the Chaplain’s role can be very helpful. First of all, enabling him to sense the special need of a person through a particular image. And secondly, enabling him to give concrete expression of his own inner gifts.

PREFACE

Ten years ago, I was called out from Industry to enter the full time work of the Church as a Home Missionary. I was summoned to appear before a committee for an oral examination. The last question put to me was; “How do you see yourself in your role as a Home Missionary?”

I responded with, “I see myself as a vessel being both filled and used by God. I see myself, for example, as a tea pot, pouring out...” I was cut off at this point by an interruption from a member of the panel, who called out, “Cups of tea!” Then there were peals of laughter.

The conversation seemed to end at this point. I remained, silenced by the interjection, and a little embarrassed. Obviously, in the hilarity, they were not in touch with the feeling and conviction of a man who, for over thirty years has been conscious of God’s Call and preparation for a ‘Special Ministry’ of which this moment was just a beginning. A vessel chosen and to be used by God for His glory.

It is from the point of view of a “vessel”, that I undertake this exercise on an ‘Image of the Chaplain’, “Chaplain as a Vessel”.

I will of necessity, enter the realm of the multiple handicapped, for it is in this area of life that I believe I am to work. As a layman I had spent many years in this field. For part of those years I enjoyed the appointed role of honorary chaplain to over five hundred handicapped people. A role which came to an end when I entered the Ministry and we became geographically separated.

Obviously, I will relate some of my experiences. In such cases, the names of persons or places will be changed or omitted, to protect the rights of individuals.

THE CHAPLAIN AS A VESSEL

Becoming Aware:

I have already stressed the value of the use of metaphor to symbolize the Chaplain's role. The Chaplains adoption of a particular role will entail, above all, sincerity. His awareness will want to come from deep down within him.

There are three things therefore, that the Chaplain will want to know in order to develop a 'depth' awareness about his/her image.

- (i) The 'image' must be of God.
- (ii) It is a gift of the Spirit.
- (iii) The gift is within you.

Chosen by God:

The most assuring words are found in John 15:16a, "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you [and your 'image']". When these words reach you, in the very depth of your being, and burn within you, go forth and let nothing stand in your way.

Saul, a zealous worker for God, chose his own 'image' and thought he was doing God a good turn. It wasn't until he was stripped of his own self—image and he discovered his role as a 'chosen vessel', that he discovered life in a new dimension.

In the field of Chaplaincy, the chaplain's role is God's choice. It is a fruit—bearing choice (John 15:16b). The image that he bears is God's image. Not his own. It is a gift of the Spirit.

Gift of the Spirit:

Peter in his Pentecostal sermon, said of the out pouring of the Holy Spirit on that occasion, that it was a fulfilment of Joel's prophesy (Acts 2:16). Indeed it was an extension of Joel's prophesy (Joel 2:28), to non-Israelite believers and to all who are afar off (Acts 2:39). Extending even to the role of the 20th century chaplain.

A paraphrase of Joel's words will lend itself to modern interpretation and understanding. "And. it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh and [anything can happen]...old men will dream dreams, young men shall see visions: [why, even a Chaplain will see himself 'clowning' to ease tension and release feelings, or a 'laser beam' piercing the inner chambers of the heart, or a 'light' showing the way, or a 'vessel' pouring out of one's self for others]".

Of course, the Chaplain may become concerned as to whether he is merely copying someone else in his 'image' awareness, or whether it is for real. If the two previous points reach you, you can be assured that the gift is for real. It is within you.

The Gift is Within You:

The Apostle Paul could have shared this same concern. He says to his Corinthian readers, “We preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ the Lord...” (2 Cor. 4:5). Then he gives a reassuring claim. “...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and. not of US.” (2 Cor. 4:7)

To discover our particular ‘image’ we turn to the realm of the “inner kingdom” where each one will discover his or her own unique gift and its unique application. What you discover will be nothing new. For it has been happening for centuries in the pages of Biblical and World History, only people were not aware of the imagery as we are today. To quote just a few examples:-

History Speaks:

King Solomon demonstrated the ‘light’ image in clarifying the claim of two women, each of whom declared herself to be the mother of the same baby.

Peter, demonstrated the ‘laser beam’ image in piercing the inner heart of Ananias and Saphira who lied to the Holy Spirit.

Red Skelton, a man grieved by the loss of his own son, ‘clowned’ in his own unique way to break tensions in others’ lives.

Helen Keller, blind and deaf; a chosen vessel; beat her handicaps, developed new skills, and then poured out her life to bring comfort, encouragement and renewal to the blind.

Types of Vessels:

In the Scriptures, we discover various types of vessels that were used to serve both the sacred and. the profane. Gold, silver, brass and earthen. Some were used to honour. Others to dishonour. Vessels are primarily used for drinking, serving, storing and pouring out. ‘Pouring out’ is a term frequently used in Scripture.

Biblical Use of Pouring Out:

Jesus did it to set an example of humility (John 13:5). God promised to pour out of His Spirit; to bring renewal, awareness and vitality (Joel 2:28). In the Preaching of the Word, ‘His name is as ointment poured forth’. It brings healing (Song of Solomon 1:3). The Psalmist used the pouring out of his complaints, to ease tension (Psalm 142:2). Grace being poured out, brings blessing (Psalm 45:2) Jesus poured out His soul unto death. Bearing our sins that we might be liberated (Isaiah 53:12). Love is poured out in costly ointment. Supporting one in a coming grief situation (Matthew 26:7, 12).

I see myself as a vessel, ‘pouring out’. Pouring out of what God has given me, for others. I became aware of this; deep down; many years ago when I came into personal contact with the multiple handicapped. I had avoided them I was afraid of them. Until, I was brought face to face with some three hundred handicapped people. I fell in love! And so began a ministry of ‘pouring out’ for others.

Pouring out for Others:

From my personal diary, I relate some of my experiences and let the reader decide for himself, the many images that can be used in being a 'vessel' pouring out of one's self for others.

"It is a bright sunny day. Some five hundred handicapped people are sitting on the grassy slope of a sporting oval, in a country setting, listening intently as I preached Christ to them and 'His name was as ointment poured forth'.

"Here are some four hundred multiple handicapped people. Deaf, dumb, blind, cerebral palsied, twisted, deformed, toothless, saliva running from their mouths down over their clothes. There were all kinds. Some faces need wiping. Some need feeding. Some require help with their toilet needs. This became a part of my work. Pouring out love in a caring ministry.

"I am summoned to a Workshop, where a group of handicapped people had need of counselling. A room is made available. They are allowed time off from their work. I listen to them, and share their needs and pray, and burdens are lifted. And a new sense of belonging emerges in both handicapped and Pastor

"I am in an Indonesian Hospital, at the bedside of a girl who has had her right hand amputated.. She cannot speak English. I greet her in Australian and reach out my left hand. She raises her left hand to meet mine and we clasp. There is a moment of silence, then her face brightens. Her sorrow is turned to joy. The two doctors with me, smile.

"We move to the other side of the ward. A dark skinned child is on a bed, clad only in a loin cloth. He is almost a skeleton. Almost every bone in his body is visible. His dark eyes are set in sunken sockets. His face is expressionless. I reach out my hand with a soft, "Hello". He raises his frail arm and places his bony hand in mine. He smiles! His eyes shine! The doctors laugh with joy!

"I enter a room in a Hostel where a handicapped boy is lying on his bed. His body is like a vegetable. He is totally handicapped and useless! Useless? I clown with him. He laughs, not as you and I can laugh. But he laughs! He communicates in his own way. He is happy!

"Here is a group of spastic children. They are wearing crash helmets. Their only means of movement is, in carts, by being carried, or to breast stroke across the floor. I want to have fellowship with them. No way! They disappear! One little fellow peeps round the corner of the hall. He is very timid. "O.K. I'll meet you half way. I'll come to you and. you come to me and we'll shake hands in the middle". I get down on my hands and knees, then flat on the floor and breast stroke across the floor toward him. He followed suit with great speed. We shook hands in the middle of the hall. Soon, children seemed to come from everywhere. Some in carts. Some being carried. Some breast stroking across the floor. We had warm fellowship together. There was Joy!

"Here is a little girl with a terrible handicap. She is six years old. The youngest of thirteen children. She is not wanted because she is illegitimate. I see her coming down the hill and I wait for her. She stops at my feet and looks up. Her sad eyes tell the story. I pat her on the head. "Hello sweetheart". Her face brightens. She took off like a 'rocket' to complete the errand on which she had been sent. Two days later she came running up to me. "Here, this is for you!" She handed me a dandelion flower the most precious gift I could ever have received.

CONCLUSION:

It is possible for a vessel to become empty or depleted. But a vessel cannot fill itself. It must be filled by another. God is the source of our supply, and it is the Spirit who fills. And the gift flows from within.

You and I can become a vessel through which God's abundant supply can flow out to others.