

Revealing Presence

Peter Edwards



Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." John 12: 20-21

Here, in a nutshell, is the military chaplain's task: to help people to see Jesus with their own eyes. Of course, what makes military chaplaincy different is the nature of the environment in which they undertake their ministry which can, at times, include places of extreme danger. A military chaplain can be found saying prayers on a parade square in rain-swept Lincolnshire; part of an expedition climbing an Austrian Alp; or sheltering from heavy gunfire following an ambush in Afghanistan. In each situation the task of the chaplain, or 'Padre,' is to reveal God's love in Christ to people who, in the course of their daily lives, would never encounter a Church community.

How exactly does a military chaplain reveal Christ to the military community? Exploring the process of revealing, Karl Barth suggests that revelation 'is the person of God speaking'(Church Dogmatics I/I). Therefore, revelation is not an abstract message about God, but it is God communicating himself and consequently revelation is always an encounter with God. God communicates himself in the conscience of a young airman who expresses doubts about the validity of the conflict he is involved in whilst serving in Iraq. God speaks in a sergeant's search for self-transcendence following the successful scaling of a Nepalese peak. Perhaps most obviously, Christ encounters airmen in the sacrificial; 'no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15: 13). The sheer breadth of revelation has always been part of creation in that God's 'eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made' (Romans 1: 20). The mud, horror and death of military life at its worst echoes profoundly the reality of Bethlehem and Calvary.

On each occasion the presence of a chaplain helps men and women to make sense of their experience of God's revelation. Often this is in a very informal setting, a tea bar, tent, or workshop. However, chaplains also conduct formal educational sessions exploring beliefs and values. Each trainee who joins the RAF has compulsory sessions with a chaplain exploring moral and ethical issues that they may encounter during their military careers. These sessions continue during each subsequent phase of their training. Indeed chaplains are involved in just about every aspect of military life, including inputs into commander's briefings, confidential welfare interviews, sporting events, expeditions, fitness tests, and exercises, Echoing words often attributed to St Francis, "Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary."

Many military personnel have little or no religious education and find it difficult to visualise God, or are left with a tyrannical image of God from their

childhood. Understanding revelation as being a movement in which God communicates himself, like a movement in personal relationships, helps the military chaplain to reveal God in a way personnel can relate to. Personnel can participate in a relationship with God. That is, they can enter into the network of relationships that already exists within the Trinity. So in prayer they can share in the eternal movement of speech from the Son to the Father. In mission, a term military commanders are familiar with, they share in the Father sending forth his Son. And in the terrible cost of war, they share in suffering like a Son forsaken by his Father. The chaplains help people to see that God is part of their daily relationships, and their daily relationships are therefore part of God. Before, during or after battle personnel often ask deep searching questions about the meaning of life in light of the death they have witnessed. At such times it is in the mystery of our own being and relationships that we find a clue to the person of God. Therefore chaplains serve alongside military personnel, even in some of the world's most dangerous places. It is here, at the very depths, when even the most cynical hands become clenched in prayer, that the presence of God can become most discernible.

In line with their ministry of presence and revelation, chaplains celebrate the Eucharist in military churches on station in the UK and overseas, in the field during exercises and on the frontline. We reveal Christ most clearly in the Eucharist which Basil Hume interestingly called "The day's ration for the day's march on our pilgrim way" (To Be A Pilgrim). Indeed for the soldier, sailor or airman the eucharistic themes of sacrifice, obedience, duty, covenant and mystery are wholly relevant and deeply poignant. For example most military personnel readily identify that covenant is not about a rigid law but it is about a personal relationship entered into by two or more parties, one of which may be a nation. Indeed it is no coincidence that 'the military' as a sign and metaphor is seen throughout the scriptures.

To summarise, the chaplains' task is quite simply the Christian imperative: to reveal God and reconcile God and humanity. It is the environment in which this is realised that is different. At times this is hindered by machismo, men and women who pretend to be tough because they are afraid to be tender. Yet at other times the gospel is clearly presented, a chaplain never has to raise the issue of sacrifice, obedience and suffering, these things are all too present in military life. We serve men and women who have been party to terrible events, and yet remain people who seek after the things of hope, faith and love. *f*

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