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Prophetic Priesthood Today

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Abstract: Prior to kings becoming rulers of Israel, the people there were a covenantal community. They were a Tribal confederation where there was equality, justice, sharing and love. After the rule of kings started, there arose an exploitative ruling class, and the participation of lay elders in officiating religious worship was replaced by a clericalized priesthood. Prophets had a pivotal role in rebuilding Israel's covenantal community. Prophetic priests are called to overcome divisive forces like casteism, to collaborate with people of other religions and ideologies, and to bring hope to the suffering and marginalized people.

Keywords: Prophetic priesthood, covenantal community, monarchy, tribal confederation, justice, counter-culture, hope.

Every disciple of Jesus is invited to promote the Reign of God. A priest as a radical disciple in particular, is expected to devote his heart, mind, soul, body and the whole being to the promotion of the Reign of God. Priesthood is basically a grace-filled call to the service of God and humanity in the footsteps of Jesus who came that all may have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10). Is priesthood today viewed more as a vocation or profession? Today there is a danger of priests becoming merely a professional like an educationist, an administrator, an organiser, a social worker, a project-manager, etc. A priest is not called to be merely a well-qualified professional but basically to be and to become a committed servant of Christ's mission.

Today's society is confronted by a gamut of problems

and dangers like aggressive violations of human rights, destructive effects of globalisation, marginalization of women, Dalits and Tribals, terrorism, casteism, consumerism, religious fundamentalism, dictatorial regimes, denial of pluralism, ecological exploitation, etc. These forces vie with one another virulently to divide and fragment humanity and to destroy the earth. The reign of God has suffered violence (Mt 11:12). In such a dehumanizing and life-destroying context of the twenty-first century, a priest is called upon to respond rightly and righteously in order to accelerate the growth of the reign of God. The need of the hour is to become a prophetic priest of God. Reigniting priesthood with the prophetic spirit will enable priests to respond appropriately and fruitfully to the challenges posed to the promotion of the reign of God in this 21st century.

Call to be a Covenantal Community

Biblical prophets in the history of Israel played a pivotal role in renewing and revitalizing the covenantal community in the ways of the Lord. Prophets emerged in Israel when monarchy was demanded and ushered in (1 Sam 8). With the entry of monarchy in Israelite society came in also all types of inequality, injustice, corruption, exploitation and marginalization of the people. Before monarchy entered into Israelite lives, the system of Tribal Confederation held them together as one faithful community of Yahweh. The covenantal community was born at Mount Sinai when the Lord declared to the people of Israel that He would be their God and they would be His people (Ex 19-20). The Israelites promised to obey and follow the ways, ordinances, commandments of the Lord which would build them into the covenantal

community.

Features of the Covenantal Community

The characteristic features of the covenantal community were well reflected in the tribal confederation life of Israel. Highlighting the socio-economic, religious and political dimensions of the tribal confederation community which was basically governed by equality, justice, fellowship, sharing and love, will help us to understand it as the covenantal community of the Lord.

The socio-economic scenario of the Israelites during the tribal confederation period was egalitarian as their basic needs were upheld. Each family had a piece of land to dwell and to cultivate. The book of Joshua in chapters 13-23 explains how the land of Canaan was distributed to all the twelve tribes of Israel. People had the facility of cultivating their own food and looking after their basic needs. In times of famine and drought the tribes whose lands had yielded plentifully, came forward to share with the famine-stricken people. There were in-built mechanisms that would take care of the poor, orphan, widows and foreigners (Lev 19:9). Accumulation of wealth, power and land in one person or group was prevented by the principles of the Jubilee Year which stipulated that mortgaged land, persons and properties had to be returned to the owners (Lev 25). Lending money to the poor without interest (Lev 25:35-38, Deut 24:10-18), doing business without exploitation and corruption were monitored (Deut 25:13-16) to prevent the gap between the rich and the poor. In the socio-economic realm the Israelites were almost a self-sufficient and self-dignified community

In the political arena, there was an equitable sharing of power among the tribes of Israel. Leadership was not centered on one man but the power to govern themselves at the family, clan and tribal levels was a shared one. It was a shared leadership and power which enabled them to discuss and solve the different problems they were confronted with. There was no centralised military system. But if a tribe was endangered by enemies, all the other tribes would go to protect them (Jud 6-8; 8:22-27; 9:1-6, 13-16). Politically the tribal confederation system guaranteed the safety, protection, sharing of power and leadership and participation of the Israelites.

Religio-culturally everyone was treated as a child of God. As there were no centralised Temple and clericalized priesthood in Jerusalem, worship was officiated in the midst of the people and in shrines by respectable and devout lay elders. The Ark of the Covenant which was a symbol of God's power and presence was carried to all the tribes to show that the Lord was a journeying God with all of them. Religiously the confederation system knit them together as one people of the covenant. In general the socio-economic, political, religio-cultural features of the tribal confederation community of Israel reveal that it was basically a just, equitable, fellowship-generating, sharing and loving covenantal community.

Rise of Monarchy and Emergence of Prophets

The rise of monarchy in Israel led to the degradation and fragmentation of the tribal confederation. In the face of the Philistine threat and invasion, the Israelites lost confidence in themselves and in Yahweh and demanded a King. They did not heed the warnings of Yahweh who apprised them of the evils, exploitation, corruption,

inequality and injustice the monarchy would impose (1 Sam 8:4-18). But the Israelites clamoured for monarchy that brought gradually ruin, degradation and destruction upon them.

The monarchical system ushered in an exploitative ruling class which appropriated the power, wealth, land and property of the people and heaped them on the king who became the supreme and all powerful ruler. The labour, produce and lands of the people were exploited for the luxurious and extravagant life style of the ruling class. The people who used to cultivate barley and wheat for their food were then forced to grow olive orchards and vineyards in order to provide wine and olive oil to the profligate ruling class. The people were pressurized to borrow and become bonded labourers when they were not able to pay back. People were uprooted from their villages to become forced labourers and mercenaries for building palatial royal houses and monuments for the ruling royal class. Agricultural economy was converted into business economy which was rampant with corruption and exploitation. The centralized Jerusalem Temple refused the Ark of the Covenant to travel from tribe to tribe and the lay elders' participation in officiating religious worship was replaced by a clericalized priesthood. In order to please their queens, princesses and concubines, the kings built temples for their gods and adulterated and relegated the worship of Yahweh. The covenantal principles and directives were routed and transgressed and the Israelite community became an anti-covenantal community in which prevailed injustice, inequality, corruption, exploitation, poverty and marginalization.

The prophets were sent into the unjust, unequal and exploitative Israelite community with the clarion call of

making them again the covenantal community of the Lord. They were the voices of the Lord to pluck up and to pull down what was unjust and unequal, to destroy and to overthrow what was exploitative and dehumanizing, to build and to plant once again the covenantal community of the Lord (Jer 1:10). They took the side of the poor who were oppressed and marginalized by the monarchical rule and condemned the evil and injustices. They announced that justice should roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Am 5:24). They demanded that all that had been appropriated from the people and accumulated on the ruling class and the rich should be equitably shared (Am 3:10; 5:7-15; 6:4-8; Mic 3:1-4). They denounced the pompous, vain and meaningless sacrifices and liturgical celebrations which were bereft of justice, equality and faithfulness and demanded a life based on justice, equality and fellowship (Isa 1:10-17; Jer 7:1-15; Am 5:21-24). They lit the light of hope and life in the lives of the people broken and marginalized by the unjust and atrocious monarchical rule (Isa 40:1-5; Jer 3:1-12; Hos 11:1-9; Am 9:11-15). The prophets' reverberating call invited the people again and again to come back to the covenantal community of the Lord. Thus the pivotal role of the prophets in Israelite history enabled the rebuilding of the covenantal community of the Lord.

Priesthood in the Prophetic Tradition

Reign-of-God Promoting Priesthood

Priesthood today lived in the prophetic spirit and tradition will make it meaningful and fruitful. The prophets were engaged in the mission of rebuilding the covenantal community of the Lord. The covenantal community in the First Testament and the Reign of God

announced in the Second Testament call for a community based on the common parenthood of God and the people as the children of God. Transcending race, caste, colour, creed, nationality, language we are called to be and to become a world community of the children of God living in equality, justice, fellowship and love.

The life and mission of a priest needs to be a telling witness of the Reign of God. By his vocation to be the servant of Christ's mission, a priest is called upon to promote reign-of-God communities in a world which is broken and fragmented by divisive forces like casteism in particular in India. It is not untrue to say that priests also become victims of casteism. To be a prophetic priest is first of all to rid oneself of all the casteistic tendencies, values and actions. Christian communities even in the twenty first century are not liberated entirely from the stifling grips of casteism. Caste practices and discriminatory customs are still upheld in certain churches. As pastors and animators of Christian communities, it is the bounden and prophetic duty of a priest to diagnose this destructive malaise of casteism and eradicate it in solidarity with the Christians who are inspired and guided by the spirit of the Reign of God. There is no place for casteistic division and discrimination in the community which partakes of one bread and one cup of Jesus. The prophetic call of priesthood is that a priest not only promotes but lives the very spirit of the reign of God in his life and mission.

Counter-Culture Producing Priesthood

To live radically and deeply the Paschal Mystery of the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus is the call of priesthood today. In a culture of selfishness and

dehumanization Jesus ushered in a counter culture of other-centeredness and dignified life for all. “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). The very life and mission of Jesus not merely announced but actualized the other-centeredness and dignified life. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). Priests are invited to model their lives after the prophetic, counter-cultural life and mission of Jesus.

In today’s context of consumerism, selfishness, accumulation of wealth and comforts, proliferation of luxuries of globalization wherein only ‘I and mine’ and not ‘others’ matter, a priest is challenged to have an interior freedom for not merely falling a prey to these temptations but also to have the spirit of sharing all he is and he has for the sake of others’ dignified life and for the promotion of the Reign of God. To break and share himself like the Eucharistic Jesus is to be prophetic in a world of selfishness and filthy consumerism. All the energies, capacities, opportunities, talents, time and sources a priest has, need to be placed at the service of the people, especially of those marginalized and dehumanized. The vow of poverty embraced by a priest becomes meaningful only when he empties himself like Jesus (Phil 2:5-8) so that others become full with the dignified life of the children of God.

A priest’s celibacy enables him to broaden the horizon of his relationship from the limited circle of his own family and relatives to the wider family of God. Jeremiah’s celibacy came in the context of his mission of rebuilding the broken people into the covenantal family of God (Jer 16:1). Transcending their own families and close-knit bonds of relations, the prophets had the freedom

of moving out and giving themselves to others and God's mission. The prophetic discipleship enshrined in priesthood does not ask us to love only those who love us, to do good only to those who will do good to us, to give only to those from whom we will get in return (Lk 7:31-34); but it demands of us to love and give to those who are marginalized and deprived of dignified life. Complaints are not uncommon today against those priests who are unduly attached to their own families, relatives and friends and siphon off the common facilities, funds, opportunities, etc to their own. The prophetic dimension of celibacy should liberate us from our narrow and self-centred circles and lead us to the wider family of God.

The prophetic aspect of the vow of obedience is to free a priest from his own self-centred plans, welfare, needs and dreams so that the plan of God becomes the supreme criterion for his life and mission. To be a prophetic disciple of Jesus whose food was to do the will of the Father (Jn 4:34), unconditional obedience to God's plans becomes a witness. To discern God's will with all sincerity and to respond to it wholeheartedly will let God's dreams come true in a priest's life and mission. Being ready to be sent where his services are most needed is characteristic of a prophet's disposition. Refusing to be transferred from a well-settled work or lucrative and powerful position, being unwilling to move to the place or ministry where his services are most needed, willing to do only what one likes, go counter to being a prophetic disciple of Jesus. Therefore if the commitment to poverty, celibacy and obedience is practised in the prophetic way, priesthood will continue to usher in a counter-culture that will bear witness to the Kingdom values.

Solidarity-based Priesthood

The prophets in Israel were the voices and messengers of Yahweh who took the side of the poor and oppressed, listened to their agonies and came forward to liberate them. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings and I have come to deliver them..." (Ex 3:7). When we browse through the pages of the Gospel, Jesus' solidarity with the poor, marginalized and dehumanized, stands out powerfully. In his first public manifesto of his mission (Lk 4:16-18), Jesus affirms that it is in and through his solidarity with the poor, he promotes the Reign of God. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20). Following the spirit of solidarity with the poor expressed in our God and through our Master and Leader Jesus, a priest today is called to preferentially opt for and to work in solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Whatever be the type of ministry a priest does, whether it is pastoral, educational, social, the concerns, issues, struggles and problems of the poor need to be the platform of his life and service. If this is not the attitude of priest, then he tends to derail from the prophetic and from even God's ways of working in solidarity with the poor. If all that priests have in the name of the poor, is not used for their welfare and dignified life, a priest turns out to be a betrayer of the poor.

Justice-oriented Priesthood

The God revealed in the prophetic traditions is predominantly the God of justice. The oracles, actions and lives of the prophets echo justice. It is through the proclamation of justice the prophets called for the

rebuilding of the broken and oppressed Israelite society. “Seek justice” (Isa 1:17), “Grant justice” (Isa 16:3), “Execute justice” (Jer 21:12), “Do Justice” Jer 22:15, Mic 6:8), “Establish justice” (Am 5:15), “Let justice roll down like waters...” (Am 5:24) were the clarion call of the prophets to rebuild the exploited, marginalized and wounded Israelite society into the covenantal community of Yahweh.

Socio-cultural analysis reveals that it is injustice at all levels of society, which is the root cause of today’s unequal and marginalized society. Therefore it is justice that can make today’s world just and equal for all. Love without justice cannot be love at all. A society without justice cannot be an egalitarian society. Justice is not merely one of the many values, but the overriding value of all values. It is in justice all other values like love, equality, fellowship, concern, compassion, sharing, peace, etc., find their meaning. If the life and mission of a priest in today’s context is to be meaningful and effective, justice-orientedness must permeate the priestly life and his ministries. Not merely charity-oriented and development-oriented approaches, but basically justice-centered approaches will bring about the transformation of society and make the reign of God more alive and active. A priestly ministry is geared towards promoting a just society where all, as children of God, live in dignity. When justice becomes a central focus of the life and mission of a priest, needless to say that he will be confronted with opposition, aggression, struggles and pains to be caused by unjust forces. Only a courageous priest with deep faith in the ultimate power of God will be able to withstand and journey with the Lord of history to bring about a transformed society of justice and equality.

A priest is not merely called to work for justice but to be justice itself in his life and mission and this is indeed a challenge to those who wish to become prophetic priests.

Pluralism-respecting Priesthood

In a world of net working, collaborating with the likeminded forces and people is a must for a priest today. Social transformation is not just the mission of one individual or one group but that of many persons and groups. It is not merely that we priests or religious or Christians alone who are on the journey of making this broken world a humanistic and egalitarian place for all. There are many persons in other religions, traditions, ideologies, races, nations, movements who are imbued with the spirit of making a better humanized world for all. Religions or ideologies are meant to unite and not to divide people.

In a world of politicized religions and communalized politics a priest has to be on the alert to recognise and counter the forces which promote uniformity negating plurality. He should be able to collaborate with the forces which respect and encourage unity that values pluralism. To acknowledge that God is acting and good is working in others requires openness and broadmindedness. Isaiah was open enough to recognize God acting in and through Cyrus, the Persian Emperor, a non Israelite and invited the Israelites in Babylonian exile to hope for their return to their own land (Isa 44:28; 45:1,13). Jesus recognised God acting in the faith of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28), the Centurion (Mt 8:5-13) and in the thanksgiving spirit of the Samaritan (Lk 17:15-19). Jesus worked for the reign of God in collaboration with both Israelites and non Israelites. A priest in the prophetic tradition and in the

spirit of Jesus needs to work in collaboration with other religions and ideologies, with other movements and organizations and thus can join the common endeavour of building a free, equal and just world for all.

Hope-generating Priesthood

The prophets not only denounced injustice and inequality but announced hope to the economically dispossessed, socially marginalized, politically victimized (Am 9:11-15; Jer 30:11-22) and religiously subjugated in Israel and to the languishing Israelite exiles in Babylon (Isa 40:1-5; 41:1-20; 43:1-5). They showed the compassionate and faithful face of God to the people of Israel assuring them that God would continue to care for them in spite of their repeated unfaithfulness and would restore to them their lost land and dignity. They kept on sowing the seeds of hope in people who were confronted with affliction, exile, sufferings, helplessness and marginalization. Even when the prophets were faced with opposition, rejection, humiliation, agonies and abandonment on account of their prophetic life and mission, they had the unflinching hope and trust in the Lord. They totally surrendered themselves to God's unfailing love and ever-abiding protection and believed strongly that God who started the good work in them would bring it to fruition.

For today's priests it is not easy to be prophetic in the context of evil forces, injustices, conflicts, contradictions, marginalization and all types of oppression. The present evil and unjust scenario is frightening and frustrating too. In such a world a priest is challenged to be a beacon of hope and optimism. He needs to believe strongly that it is not he alone, but he by the power of God and in

collaboration with likeminded forces would carry out his prophetic mission. He is called to instill and evoke hope in the lives of the suffering, the poor, the exploited and the marginalized, so that the journey of becoming the children of God with a dignified life moves on and ahead.

A Priest of the Twenty-First Century

It has been a modest attempt in this article to discover the different and meaningful ways of being the right and relevant priest in the context of today and in the light of prophetic tradition. The twenty-first century poses to priests a myriad of challenges and opportunities to make priesthood relevant, effective and fruitful. Reign-of-God promoting priesthood, counter culture producing priesthood, solidarity-based priesthood, justice-oriented priesthood, pluralism-respecting priesthood and hope-generating priesthood could make one a prophetic priest of the twenty-first century.