

# *Our Presence in the world*

## *The Royal Priesthood of Christ*

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Text for study: 1 Peter 1:22-2:10

What is the nature of our task as Christians in a world of poverty and injustice? There is no better phrase that catches the whole of that task as the expression 'royal priesthood' which occurs in the present passage. But both words need interpretation.

The expression itself comes from the Old testament. In Exodus 19:1 and 6, the Lord says to the people of Israel through Moses: 'If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own special people among all the peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words echoed in 1 Peter 2:5 and 2:9.

The whole epistle of Apostle Peter is thought to have been based on a sermon preached on the occasion of the baptism of new converts during the feast of Easter. One can imagine the newly baptized men and women, clad in white robes, assembled probably in one of the Catacombs of Rome before sunrise on Easter Sunday. The Apostle stands before them explaining to them the meaning of their baptism, and giving the Christians their commission for life in the world. It parallels the Lord Yahweh giving His commission to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai.

As in the Sinai covenant, in the Christian covenant of baptism, also the first element is the call to holiness (1 Peter 1:14 ff.). What does it mean to be holy? We are often inclined to disregard the call to holiness altogether, or see it only in negative and pietistic terms.

Hope, Faith and Love are the positive aspects of holiness (1 Peter 1:3 ff.). Hope is not wishful thinking; a living hope, in the Bible, is the point of orientation of our whole life. It is looking forward to the coming of Christ and His Kingdom. In 1:13 the Apostle exhorts his hearers to set their hopes fully on the grace that is coming at the open manifestation of Christ. Our hope as Christians is centered around the risen Christ, present in the world in a hidden way, to be clearly and openly present in the world at 'the last day'.

In 1:7, the Apostle speaks about the need for the genuineness of their faith to be tested by various trials and by suffering. Faith is that quality of strength, reliability, unshakability and freedom from anxiety that comes to us when we are firmly established in the love and grace of God. We can become fully conscious about this faith only when things begin to turn against us, and our usual strength and support is gone. In trials and troubles, in the face of opposition and persecution, the early disciples learned that the power of God supporting them in a hidden and interior way could uphold them against the strongest waves of opposition. The martyr

demonstrated the strength of this inner faith by his fearlessness before the oppressive might of the powers of the earth. In India today we need this quality of inner strength which is not afraid of opposition and is full of hope in the face of obstacles, a faith which trusts, and relies upon the power of God to sustain us in trouble and tribulation.

In 1:22, the Apostle exhorts the newly baptized to sincere, earnest, deep, brotherly love. By subjecting themselves to baptismal teaching and by becoming part of a community of love and faith and hope, they have begun to be purified (1:22). That purity and holiness has to be continually developed, through sincere and self-sacrificing love towards others. Love in the New testament is neither a feeling nor just liking others. It is the quality of mutual self-surrender and active concern for the welfare of others.

These three, then, are the elements of holiness:

- hope, looking forward to the coming of Christ, and not to our own success and comfort.
- faith, being established solidly in Christ and therefore free from unreliability, dishonesty, anxiety and deceptiveness; and
- love, patiently surrendering oneself to others and being actively engaged in their welfare.

Verse 1:14 says: 'not being squeezed into the mould of blind passion'- not being led by one's instinctive desires and lusts. It is not simply that these passions are sinful. They are actually misleading and deceptive. They promise you gratification, as the serpent promised Eve in the garden of Eden. In the end, however, they deceive. They give you the moment's pleasure, but not lasting satisfaction. The best of contemporary literature in the West is devoted to the theme of the deceptiveness of physical passions. Many intelligent men and women in all parts of the world have revolted against the puritanical, restrictive ethics of previous centuries and sought to assert their freedom by taking a positive attitude towards sensuality. For many it was a liberating experience in the beginning. But later one finds it as enslaving as the puritanical ethics against which one revolted. The weakness of the puritanical ethics lies in its basically negative framework.

True holiness is achieved by the combination of hope, faith and love expressed in worship and daily life. Give your strength and time to prayer and worship and the loving service of your fellowmen and the passions will gradually be conquered.

Our ability to become a 'kingdom of priests' or a 'royal priesthood' is conditioned by this call to holiness. But what does 'royal priesthood' mean?

In the book of Exodus, it clearly means that the nation of Israel is to serve as a priestly nation on behalf of the other nations of the earth. In other words, Israel, without any special merit on her part, is called to a special degree of intimacy with God. But not for her own sake- rather for the sake of the nations. 'All the earth is mine' (Exodus 19:5). They are to stand before God as a priest for the other nations.

This is also the calling of Christians, of the Church. We are a people gathered from all the nations of the earth, not because of any special merit in us, but by His gracious calling, to a life of close intimacy with God. That is what distinguishes us from those who are not Christians. We have been given a privilege of knowing Christ, and through Him of living in great, close intimacy with God. But this is a great responsibility as well. We cannot take this call lightly and expect that we will be automatically holy. First we must keep in mind the two poles of our calling, namely, that it is out of His free grace that God has called us, and therefore that the call does not make us any better than others. There is no room for feeling superior to others. Second, our calling is always to an existence on behalf of others, Christians and others. This is what priesthood means. A priest is always one who lives to intercede for others and not for himself. And all of us have been by baptism incorporated into the one eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ who ever lives to make intercession for the whole world. Our priesthood is a part of this ministry of universal intercession.

But holiness is always a call and demands a responsive action. Apostle Peter says: 'Be holy, for I am holy' (1 Peter 1:16). It is a demand and a gift. The demand is to grow up by the spiritual milk of the Word (2:2), to put away all bitterness, resentment, malice and hatred (2:1), to love one another earnestly (1:22), and to come to Christ and to be built up by His Holy Spirit to become an abode of the Spirit and a holy priesthood (2:4,5), offering up our own lives along with that of Christ on behalf of all (2:5), and to announce by word and deed the marvelous grace of God that has called us out of the deceptive pleasures of this life, into the joyous light of expectant, faithful, loving service and worship (2:9).