

Fearless Presence: Christian Practice in a Secular Age

Sam Wells

In *Living Without Enemies* and *A Nazareth Manifesto* I explore four models of social engagement: working for, working with, being with, and being for. Here I offer a brief summary.

Working for is where I do things and they make your life better. I do them because thereby I'm financially rewarded, I receive public esteem, I enjoy exercising my skills, I delight to alleviate your need or hardship, I seek your good opinion and gratitude; perhaps all of the above. Working for is the established model of social engagement. It takes for granted that the way to address disadvantage or distress is for those with skills, knowledge, energy and resources to introduce those capacities to enhance the situation of those who are struggling. It assumes that the advantaged have abundance, which defines them, and that they should maximise that surplus through education and training and exercise it through applying their skills as broadly as appropriate. By contrast the 'needy' are defined by their deficit; if they have capacities, these are seldom noticed or harnessed. Working for identifies problems and focuses down on the ones it has the skills and interest to fix. It then moves on to address further such problems, of which the world is never short. It seldom stops to ask why the recipients of such assiduous corrective measures are invariably so ungrateful.

Working with is a different model. Like working for it gains its energy from problem-solving, identifying targets, overcoming obstacles, and feeding off the bursts of energy that result. But unlike working for, which assumes the concentration of power in the expert and the highly skilled, it locates power in coalitions of interest, initially collectives of the like-minded and similarly socially-located, but eventually partnerships across conventional divides of religion and class around common causes. Its stumbling-blocks are not the maladies working for identifies; they are pessimism, apathy, timidity, lack of confidence, and discouragement. By the forming of networks and the creation of a movement, where all stakeholders come together and it's possible for everyone to win, working with establishes momentum and empowers the dispossessed.

Being with begins by largely rejecting the problem-solution axis that dominates both the previous models. Its main concern is the predicament that has no solution, the scenario that can't be fixed. It sees the vast majority of life, and certainly the most significant moments of life, in these terms: love can't be achieved; death can't be fixed; pregnancy and birth aren't a problem needing a solution. When it comes to social engagement, it believes one can seldom solve people's problems – doing so disempowers them and reinforces their low social standing. Instead, one must accompany them while they find their own methods, answers, approaches – and meanwhile celebrate and enjoy the rest of their identity that's not wrapped up in what you (perhaps ignorantly) judge to be their problem. Like working with, being with starts with people's assets not their deficits. It seeks never to do for them what they can perfectly well, perhaps with encouragement and support, do for themselves. But most importantly being with seeks to model the goal of all relationships: it sees problem-solving as a means to a perpetually-deferred end, and instead tries to live that end – enjoying people for their own sake.

Being for lacks the energy and hopefulness of working with and working for, and yet also lacks the crucial with that characterises being with and working with. It's the philosophy that's more concerned with getting the ideas right, with using the right language, having the right attitudes, ensuring products are sustainably sourced and investments are ethically funded, people are described in positive ways and accountable public action is firmly distinguished from private consumer choice. Much of which is good; but in its clamour that Something Must Be Done, it invariably becomes apparent that it's for somebody else to do the doing. The alternative to unwise action becomes not engaged presence but cynical withdrawal: multiple causes are advanced, but their untidy details and complexities are often disdained. Full of criticism for working for and working with, apt to highlight the apparent passivity of being with, it lacks a concrete alternative to any of them. And yet in an information-saturated, instantly-judging, observer-shaped internet age, it's the default position of perhaps the majority.

Having characterised these four models, and recognised the degree of overlap between them, the next step is to locate them theologically. One can see Jesus' 'saving' as working for, focused on a week in Jerusalem; and the 'organising' as working with, spread over three years of public ministry in Galilee. But that still leaves perhaps 30 years in Nazareth, give or take a spell as a baby in Egypt. And here's the question: if Jesus was all about working for, how come he spent around 90% being with (in Nazareth), 9% working with (in Galilee) – and only 1% working for (in Jerusalem)? Are those percentages significant – and do they provide a template for Christian ministry? Surely Jesus knew what he was doing in the way he spent his time; or do we know better?

This is the theological foundation upon which, in *A Nazareth Manifesto*, having sought to dismantle the stranglehold working for has on the Christian imagination, I elucidate eight dimensions of what being with actually involves. These are my best attempts to describe how the persons of the Trinity are with each other.

- The first is *presence*, which seems obvious until you realise that neither working for nor being for necessarily require presence: they can often operate from a safe distance. Presence means being in the same physical space as the person with whom you are engaging.
- Next comes *attention*, which turns generality into particularity, and transforms 'showing up' into focused interaction. Attention requires one to harness concentration, memory, emotion, intellect, gaze, scrutiny, wonder and alertness here and nowhere else, directly and without mediation.
- Then there is *mystery*. This rests on distinguishing between a problem, which has a generic quality, can be perceived equally well by anybody, can be addressed from the outside, and can be solved using skills acquired elsewhere, and a mystery, which is unique, can't be fixed or broken down into its constituent parts, is not fully apparent to an outsider, but can only be entered, explored, and appreciated. Treating, for example, death as a problem risks wasting energies pursuing solutions, many of which take one away from a person's presence and divert attention elsewhere – thereby missing the call to be with someone as they enter a great mystery.
- Lest all this seem too solemn and earnest, the fourth dimension is *delight*. This is the recognition of abundance where conventional engagement is inclined only to see deficit. Delight rejects the template of how things should be, and opens itself to surprise and humour and subversion and playfulness. Delight is glad to take time where conventional engagement is overshadowed by urgency.
- The next two dimensions are in some ways a pair. *Participation* names the way with is indispensable and unsubstitutable. It diverts attention from what is done to ensuring the right balance of who does it. Of the hundred reasons to bypass being with, efficiency is near the top of the list. Participation says there's no justification for leaving someone behind, and queries whether our hurry to get somewhere is rooted in our reluctance truly to engage with the person with whom we are travelling.
- By contrast *partnership* is more prepared to see how respective gifts can, when appropriately harnessed, together enable a team to reach a common goal. Partnership sees how the gifts of the 'needy' person, habitually obscured by the working-for impulse to be helpful on one's own terms, can make unique contributions to common projects. In this sense it comes within the territory of working with, and indicates how closely working with and being with sometimes resemble one another.
- The dimension that encapsulates and epitomises all the previous ones is *enjoyment*. This rests on Augustine's distinction between what we use, which runs out, and is a means to some further end, and what we enjoy, which is of value for its own sake, an end in itself. Being with, simply put, is enjoying people whom the world, having no use for, is inclined to discard.
- Finally *glory* names the purpose of all things: the opening words of John's gospel ('the Word became flesh... and we have seen his glory' 1.14) demonstrate that the epitome of glory, and the originating purpose and final goal of all things, is God being with us in Christ.

Now it's time to introduce my three lectures by making a distinction between three often-confused terms – discipleship, ministry and mission.

Discipleship is first of all one's relationship with God – a daily walk of grace, wonder, intimacy, sadness at failure, repentance, renewal, forgiveness, longing, gratitude, and companionship. But this can't be expressed in a single, direct encounter. It has at least four other dimensions. There is one's relationship with oneself – one that can't be taken for granted, can be the source of much grief and discomfort, and is not wholly incorporated within one's relationship to God. There is one's relationship with other Christians, understood not so much as ministry, but as the need, side by side, to embody Christ together and work out one's salvation with collective fear and trembling. There are the personal relations of life – not those of church (ministry) or world (mission) but household, family, and friends, where one's role is coloured, but not defined entirely, by one's faith. And there's the wider universe, the heavens above, the soil, seas and skies, the animal, plant and insensate creation, which together shape one's notion of life, beauty, purpose, struggle, and glory. I understand discipleship as being with God as shaped by being with oneself, one's community of faith, one's close relationships and the wider creation. Thus these are the subjects addressed in the first half of this book.

Discipleship overlaps with ministry in several ways. Those engaged in ministry never stop being disciples. Meanwhile there are many occasions when one is 'wearing more than one hat' at the same time. For example when a person tithes a healthy percentage of their income to the church, that's an act of discipleship; but when they donate to the fund for putting a new roof on the church building, that's an act of ministry. The first is about their gratitude to God, the second is about their desire to strengthen the life of their congregation. It's a subtle distinction. But those exercising ministry need to be able to make such distinctions. For they should be aware of when their own inclinations, preferences, needs and weaknesses in discipleship come into tension with what is required of them in ministry. For example it can be hard when one's desire to be a friend – and to keep a friendship – come into conflict with words that need to be said or choices that need to be made in the exercise of ministry. Again one's own preferred style of worship or music or catechesis may be somewhat different from what a congregation needs at a particular time; the way one has come to know God or feels most intimate in expressing devotion (discipleship) may not be what's most helpful for the community as a whole (ministry).

Ministry means taking up a specific role in order to help build up the church. That role may be formal or informal. Ordained ministry refers to the setting-aside of certain people, usually involving extensive formation, education and training, to carry out fundamental roles in a Christian community, often including the performance of sacraments, the preaching of the word, the leading of worship, and the convening of the body's decision-making process. Entering ordained ministry means being set apart; and in some traditions this means wearing specific clothes. It's seldom spelled out what these clothes, notably the clerical collar, actually signify. Since the clothes are highly relevant for the ministry of being with, this is a suitable place to do so.

The collar says one thing to parishioner and stranger alike: 'This conversation we're about to have, this conversation we're now having, could be the most important one of your life. It doesn't have to be – I can laugh, I can relax, I can have fun, I can just be with you in joy or in sorrow. But it can be. It may not be the right time for you, but it's always the right time for me. I will never tell you I'm too busy, I will never make light of your struggles, I will never tell you something more interesting actually happened to me, I will never say "I know" when you're exploring a feeling for the first time, I will never change the subject when you bring up something that's hard to hear. I'll never do any of those things because all of them in different ways are saying I'm out of my depth. And what the collar is saying is, I am someone who, however deep you wish to go, will never be out of my depth. You can trust me to listen. You can trust me to withhold my personal investment in the issues for another time and another place. You can trust me to be alert to the ways of God however strange the story you tell. You can trust me to know when some kind of specialized help from another party may be in order. But you can also trust me to know that now could be the time more than any other time for the moment of truth.'

One new deacon, a month after his ordination, made one of the biggest mistakes in ministry he ever made. There was a gas explosion and several parishioners were in the general hospital on the other side of town with severe burns. He didn't have a car so he took the bus each afternoon for a couple of weeks to make hospital visits. One afternoon he was getting off the bus and the driver

asked him to wait a few moments until everyone else had got off at the last stop. The driver said, 'Do you ever hear confessions?' The young deacon was very conscious that he was not yet a priest and couldn't give absolution, so he asked where the bus driver lived and gave him the address of the priest whose parish he lived in. What a fool he was. His clerical collar had done its work. A stranger realized what he did not – that the collar was saying 'I'm not out of my depth in any conversation you are called to have with me.' But that afternoon the young deacon failed to live up to his collar. He was so worried about doing the right thing by the procedures of church discipline that he couldn't see that here was a sinner who was asking to meet God, a prodigal who was running to come home to the Father. He gave the driver the address of his parish priest. It's unlikely he ever made that rectory visit. That bus driver wanted the young deacon to help him change his life. He forgot that in the ministry of being with, the moment of truth could always be right now.

Thus ordained ministry highlights that ministry is to be undertaken reverently, soberly and after serious thought. But ordination by no means circumscribes the whole of ministry. An act of ministry is any action of a disciple that enables the body to function, flourish, and become more faithful. That can be taken by a couple that volunteers to counsel others who are preparing for marriage; by a child who sings in a choir; or by a person who sweeps the gutters on the roof of the church building. Ministry isn't 'helping the clergy,' or 'getting the jobs done': it's answering the call given at conversion and fulfilling the commission bestowed at baptism to 'feed my sheep.' The humbler and more mundane aspects of ministry are best seen as acts of preparation and formation for the greater challenges that inevitably arise. Acts of welcome and peace-sharing are good in themselves, but become more significant when a person returns to a community after a period in prison for a shameful offence, or when a person turns up to worship in a congregation not long after a marriage breakdown in they were generally supposed to be the destructive perpetrator. Cleaning the parish hall is a worthy task in its own right, but comes more into focus when the hall has been used to give temporary hospitality to a person fleeing persecution or adverse weather.

One Sunday a preacher felt he'd taken a bit of a risk by speaking explicitly about a war that was underway and which he believed required theological scrutiny. He knew some congregation members would feel uncomfortable. After the service a formidable-looking man, who had a military air and a rosy complexion, asked to have a word. The preacher feared a brow-beating. Instead, the man began to talk hesitantly, humbly and tentatively about how much it meant to him to receive communion, particularly holding the sacramental bread in his two hands. And he said he wondered how it was possible to become one of the people who distributed communion, since he wanted to be close to the sacrament and bring others close too. He was discerning a call from discipleship to ministry. The preacher was thinking only about himself.

The third dimension of the Christian life is mission. Whereas ministry seeks to know Christ and make Christ known within the body of believers, mission addresses the world – all that has taken the freedom of God's patience not yet to believe. But mission often describes that world as the kingdom – thus anticipating that it will be the theatre of God's epiphanies, the sphere of the Spirit's work beyond the church, where disciples are humbled by acts of charity the church could seldom encompass, surprised by goodwill that puts the church to shame, and challenged by examples of integrity, courage, kindness and wisdom the church badly needs. Again, discipleship often overlaps with mission: when one pauses to read and reflect on a verse of scripture while taking a break between tasks in a secular workplace, it's an act of discipleship; when a colleague asks what you're reading, and you perhaps invite them to join you, it quickly becomes mission. Similarly if you sit on a bench eating lunch, being with yourself and creation, it's discipleship; if you offer a sandwich to a stranger beside you, it's an act of mission. Likewise ministry and mission frequently overlap or coincide: if you take a group of young people to cultivate an elderly person's garden, it looks like an act of mission (helping the poor); but it may in truth be primarily ministry – strengthening the young people's sense of purpose and helping them bond as a group. Similarly if a pastor speaks on local radio in a 'pause for thought' reflection, they will be speaking to disciples (ministry) and the rest of the region (mission) simultaneously.