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Beatific presence: The praxis of priestly mission in a wounded country

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A reflection on Christian mission in a wounded world requires a focus on priestly praxis. This article explores the biblical notion of divine blessing as a key aspect of priestly mission praxis in wounded communities.

Contribution: It interprets the Aaronic benediction (Nm 6:22–27) in the South African context as basis for a beatific priestly praxis that encompasses abundance, protection, compassion, restoration and peace in the midst of wounded communities.

Keywords: mission; blessing; priestly praxis; Aaronic benediction; woundedness; South Africa.

Introduction

The annual conference of the Southern African Missiological Society in January 2023 convened in Stellenbosch on the theme 'Mission in a wounded world'. This is a revised version of the presentation I made at that conference, which I present here in memory of our late colleague, Welile Mazamisa. Like his doctoral thesis on the 'good Samaritan' (Mazamisa 1987), this article also deals with a 'beatific comradeship' of compassion.

The scope of transformative Christian engagement in society has been expressed in terms such as evangelising, community building, liberating, reconciling and earthkeeping praxis.[1] When considering mission in a *wounded* world, *priestly* acts of compassion are required. This article is a praxis-based exploration of blessing, based on the Aaronic benediction in Numbers 6:24–26. I use a matrix that integrates seven dimensions of praxis: agency, spirituality, contextual understanding, ecclesial scrutiny, interpreting the tradition, discernment for action and reflexivity (see Kritzinger 2011).[2]

Agency

In the early stages of Hebrew society, blessings were pronounced in the context of the family, with the patriarch as the agent who conferred it on his offspring (Gerstenberger 2002:48), but with the construction of the tabernacle (and later the temple), it became the prerogative of priests. The Aaronic benediction became a key component of Jewish worship and also featured in a limited way in Orthodox and Catholic worship, but it was during the Protestant Reformation that it became more central to Christian worship. In his Wittenberg liturgy of 1523, Martin Luther placed it at the conclusion of his German Mass and in 1542 it was also adopted in the Reformed liturgy of Geneva (Seybold 1977:11). In this way, the Aaronic benediction became the 'last word' in much Protestant worship.[3] This practice affirms an intrinsic connection between blessing and sending, benediction and mission:

> Our closing charge to the congregation and benediction can either send us with God's blessing for our own comfort or empower us to embody the good news in a world that needs to see it. (Goheen 2014:204)

A mission-shaped understanding of divine blessing cannot be limited to individual priests performing benedictions in liturgical settings. It expands our view to include all Christians as agents of blessing, implying the priesthood of all believers, which is not a peculiarly Protestant view, as is often assumed. The Second Vatican Council affirmed three (intimately related) forms of priesthood: The priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ, the church as a priestly community, and

1.For an explanation and justification of this fivefold scope of Christian mission, see Kritzinger (2025).

2.To clarify where I am writing from, I am a minister of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and regularly pronounce a benediction in a church with a vast majority of Black members. This topic is not merely of academic interest, but an existential reflection on my own priestly praxis among deeply wounded people.

3.For this reason, Koole (1967) entitled his book on the benediction *Het laatste woord* [The final word].

individual ministerial priesthood[4]: This threefold priesthood can be regarded as an ecumenical consensus[5]: 'Discipleship sealed by baptism gives all members of the Church a common ontological foundation of priesthood from which different ministries flow' (Risley 2000:121; see also Ashley 2000).

The Aaronic benediction pronounced at the conclusion of worship is therefore a *moment* of blessing intended to initiate a *movement* of blessing beyond the church's four walls. It serves as 'a bridge from the sacral act of worship in the sanctuary to the life outside', meant to motivate believers into living 'the liturgy after the liturgy' as a community of beatific comradeship. The adjective beatific, from the Latin *beatus* [blessed], can be used both passively (to be blessed) and actively (to bless). I use it in both senses, like Mazamisa (1987:173): 'Without him [*God*], comradeship is accursed; within him comradeship is beatified [*passive*]; through him it becomes beatific [*active*] comradeship'. Mission as priestly vocation means that believers are blessed by God *into* blessing others. The notion of vocation is inherent in the biblical understanding of blessing: '[*W*]hen we bless something [*or someone*], we impart, invoke or recognize some sense of vocation – some sort of duty or new trajectory into the future' (Davison 2014:13).

Interpreting the tradition

The actual benediction (Nm 6:24–26) is provided with an introductory instruction (vv. 22–23) and a theological interpretation (v.27):

> 22 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying,
>
> 23 Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,
>
> 24 The LORD bless you and keep you;
>
> 25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
>
> 26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.
>
> 27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them (NRSV)

This benediction (vv. 24–26) is a carefully crafted composition in Hebrew, consisting of three poetic lines containing two versets each.[6] The first poetic line consists of three words, the second of five and the third of seven, giving a total of 15 words and a clear sense of progression. The second verset in each poetic line is usually understood as 'epexegetically' explaining the first and not adding a new idea. Added to this internal progression within each line, there is also a progression from one line to the next, leading to the climax in 'give you peace' (v. 26). This is an example of what Alter (1985:10–11) calls the 'impulse to intensification' in Hebrew poetry, evidenced by a 'dynamic movement from one verset to the next'.

Blessing as sharing abundance (v. 24)

The Aaronic benediction starts with the verb *brk* [bless], which is used across wide semantic fields in the Hebrew Bible. God's blessing includes everyday material benefits and a *state* of blessedness, as opposed to *events* of salvation or rescue.[7] Westermann (1978) has argued that we should distinguish between – but not separate – God's saving and blessing work, making sure not to reduce God's dealings with humanity to the one concept of 'salvation'. Terms such as success, presence of God and peace appear when blessing is spoken of and 'promises of blessing and descriptions of a state of prosperity play an important role alongside the promises of deliverance' (Westermann 1978:34).

Blessing is also associated with a long life and fertility: 'God blessed them, and God said to them: be fruitful and multiply' (Gn 1:28). It is also linked to the key institutions of kingship and temple, which are both concerned with 'God's constant activity' as sources of well-being for the whole community (Westermann 1978:30). Davison (2014:15–19) likewise highlights the material blessings of abundance, fruitfulness and prosperity as integral to the flourishing promised to the righteous. In summary, blessing deals with 'God's good gifts in this earthly life' (Miller 1975:249).

Blessing as protection from harm (v. 24)

The second verset in v. 24, which shows what the verb *brk* means in this specific literary context, contains the Hebrew verb *šmr* ['guard' or 'protect'], which also covers a wide semantic range in the Bible, such as protection from: attack by enemies (Ps 17:8), injury (Ps 34:20), illness (Ps 41:3), unjust accusations (Ps 17:8) and various other troubles (Brown 2002:199). Psalm 121 uses this verb six times for the LORD's all-round care, which includes protection from demonic forces. That element was developed in later Jewish commentaries, such as the Community Rule (1QS) at Qumran: 'May he bless you with every good and keep you *from all evil*' (Smoak 2015:2, *emphasis in original*) and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan:

> May the Lord bless you *in all your occupations*, and guard you from night demons and from frightening demons and noon-day demons and morning demons and damaging demons and shadow demons (in Smoak 2015:2).

Blessing as radiant and guiding presence (v. 25)

The second poetic line (v. 25) starts with the vivid image of YHWH's shining face. At the centre of verse 25 – which is

4.See *Lumen Gentium* par. 31: 'The faithful who by baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world' (ed. Flannery 1975:388).

5.In addition to the Protestant and Catholic views already mentioned, Wesche (2000:167–168) points out that Eastern Orthodoxy shares this view of all church members as the 'new royal priesthood'. Pentecostal and Charismatic churches similarly emphasise the inclusion of all Christians in God's ongoing mission. It is therefore justified to speak of an ecumenical consensus on 'the priesthood of all believers'.

6.Since the benediction is a poetic composition, I use the terms 'poetic line' and 'verset' to describe it (Alter 1985:9).

7.Eichrodt (1951:33) describes this comprehensiveness of divine blessing as including 'earthly possessions, many children, long life, friendship and love, as well as wisdom, beauty, honour and political freedom'.

structurally at the centre of the whole benediction – is the word *panayw* [his face], which suggests that YHWH blesses not only by *doing for* but fundamentally by *being with*.[8] To be blessed is to experience God's presence.[9] Miller (1975) explains verse 25 as follows:

> The face of Yahweh indicates the presence of God, but the shining countenance is an emphatically positive presence for help and favor, a sign of the friendly and wellbeing nearness of God, the gracious and helping turning of God to human being. (p. 245)

This metaphor of light shining in darkness includes elements of assurance and joy, but also of deliverance and guidance (Brown 2002:198). The four key terms in the Aaronic benediction (bless, guard, grace, peace) are quoted in 12 of the 15 Psalms of Ascent (Ps 120–134), thereby linking the notion of blessing with guidance for pilgrims on their journey (Berlin 2005:185). Some other Psalms also show that 'the shining face of Yahweh' was connected to pilgrimage[10]:

> The expression conveyed the idea of Yahweh's presence beaming out from the temple to guide, protect, and deliver pilgrims seeking the face of Yahweh at the temple. (Smoak 2015:104)

Blessings as compassion for the suffering (v. 25)

Whereas the first poetic line focussed on preventing and warding off harm, the second addresses harm that has already happened. The verb *ḥnn* in the second verset of verse 25 – which is often translated as 'to be gracious' – focusses on giving help when harm, often life-threatening harm, has *already* occurred (Koole 1967:14). It has the connotation of God's saving attention for those seriously wounded, such as in Ps 56:1: '*Be gracious* to me, o God, for people trample on me; all day long my foes oppress me'. It is wise to translate God's blessing presence in verse 25b as 'be merciful', rather than 'be gracious', to prevent the misunderstanding that this refers to the forgiveness of individual sins.[11] The phrase 'The LORD be gracious to you' in verse 25b is not directed at a distressed Martin Luther, sitting in a monastic cell in Germany, seeking a merciful God for his personal sins, but at a distressed Martin Luther King, sitting in a prison cell in Birmingham Alabama, seeking God's intervention for justice to the suffering black community of the United States.[12] The shining face of the LORD 'over you' in this benediction 'efficaciously confers' the rescuing presence of God to the trampled and oppressed people of Psalm 56:1. God's merciful face here does not shine primarily on sinners but on the sinned-against.[13]

8.This helpful distinction is derived from Wells (2018).

9.Vetter (1971) confirms this by entitling his book on God's blessing as *Yahwes Mit-sein* (YHWH's 'presence', literally 'being-with' or 'accompaniment').

10.Smoak (2015:92–105) gives a detailed discussion of Psalms 27, 42, 24, 31, 67 and 80 to show the close link between pilgrimage to the temple and the shining face of YHWH.

11.Korpel (1989:6) lists verbs that are used parallel with *ḥanan* [with God as subject], which cover a wide range of compassionate, helping, rescuing and healing actions.

12.This is confirmed by the LXX, which translated *ḥanan* in verse 25 here as ἐλεήσαι, from ἐλεέω [show mercy].

13.The Asian missiologist Raymond Fung (1992) made an important contribution to the understanding of evangelism by highlighting the distinction between 'sinners' and 'sinned-against' in *Monthly Letters on Evangelism* from his desk at the World Council of Churches.

Blessing as dignifying restoration (v.26)

The metaphor of God's lifted face in the third poetic line (v. 26) is unusual, found nowhere else in the Old Testament, but related expressions suggest that it means an appreciative gaze, a look that finds joy in the other, that expresses attraction and pleasure. Koole (1967:16) writes: 'The surprising thing about the priestly blessing is therefore that YHWH wishes to delight in looking at Israel'. Whereas the first poetic line confers God's *protection* for the threatened and the second line grants God's rescue for the *downtrodden*, the third line expresses God's *pleasure* in facing God's people, acknowledging their dignity and granting them peace. When the verb *brk* [bless] is used to express what God believers do towards God – as in Psalm 103:1 and numerous other verses – it expresses joyful recognition of God's exalted dignity and worthiness, but here the inverse happens: God expresses respect and joyful affirmation of human worth and dignity. According to Delitzsch, if God *lifts up* God's face to look at us, then God is not pictured as *above* us, 'looking down' from heaven, but as standing *before* us:

> In the third saying, God's condescension [*Herablassung*] grows into a kind of love … according to which God, so to speak, steps onto the same level as human beings and, from that position, lifts up his face at them, looking at them with eyes of love. (in Koole 1967:17; *author's own translation*)

In this benediction, the LORD meets us face to face, looking at us with delight, with the same joy as in Genesis 1:31, when God declared creation to be very good. This uplifted face of God's blessing presence is also what we see in the face of Jesus of Nazareth, kneeling to wash his disciples' feet, looking up at them to reveal the kenotic nature of his mission and to establish the basis of theirs: 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (Jn 13:35) and 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (Jn 20:21).

After this positive and affirming opening to line three, it is not surprising that its second verset, and thereby the whole benediction, climaxes in the words: 'and give you *peace*' (v. 26). God's *shalom* is comprehensive well-being, communal harmony, wholeness, Ubuntu, humanity and prosperity. This is a blessing as restoration: deep inner healing of brokenness and woundedness, but also the dream of a just society and a reconciled world, the promise of the reign of God, the dawning Day of God that sustains our faith and hope. Since peace and reconciliation are not achievable without justice, a mission-shaped eschatology does not encourage passive waiting for God's reign, but mobilises believers to work actively with God for the coming of that comprehensive 'household of freedom' (Russell 1987).

Ecclesial scrutiny

Having examined the text of the Aaronic benediction, a praxis approach next investigates the role that it played in the ongoing unfolding of Christian history.

The actors and their actions

In Jewish history, the Aaronic benediction has been pronounced exclusively by priests, a practice that was followed by Christian churches. It is seen as a significant ritual moment in public worship, but there is difference of opinion on what kind of speech act or ritual event it is. Some scholars view the Aaronic benediction as no more than a prayer or a wish: '*May* the LORD bless you and keep you' or '*I pray that* the LORD may bless you and keep you'. Other scholars (like Biese 2022) contend that it is not a prayer but 'a pronouncement … about God's disposition toward His people'. In other words, it is a statement: 'The LORD blesses you and keeps you', which comes close to being a promise: 'The LORD [*will always*] bless you and keep you'. There is a wide consensus, however, that it is not a magical mantra that works *ex opere operato.*

To understand the nature of the benediction, verse 27 is important: 'They [*the sons of Aaron*] shall *put* my *name* on the Israelites, and *I* will bless them'. In other words, God is personally at work – in and through human words and human hands. There is a distinction as well as a delicate correlation between God's act of blessing and the priestly words (and gesture) to 'put' the LORD's name 'on the people'. It is God alone who blesses – and remains free to act – not manipulated by priests or believers, but God's words, spoken in blessing by human agents, are powerful: They 'shall not … return to me empty, but … shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it' (Is 55:11).

King (2005:55) affirms this view: 'Yahweh's blessing is the gift of his name to his people … That gift is *efficaciously conferred on* His people in the pronouncement of these gracious words of benediction' (*author's own emphasis*). A blessing is more than a statement, a wish or a petition; it 'efficaciously confers' God's presence and gifts, which makes it performative and 'quasi-sacramental' (Westermann 1978:42, 109). This performative impact of the Aaronic benediction is also clear from the community responses recorded in Lv 9:22–24 and Ben Sira 50:20–21: The worshippers shout praises and bow down in adoration, overwhelmed by the glory of the LORD's blessing presence.

Blessing gestures

The gesture of lifting up hands is an inherent feature of the liturgical act of blessing.[14] A priest lifts up his[15] hands and extends them towards a gathered congregation. In the words and gesture of the benediction, a minister addresses each member in the community personally, with the same attentiveness and solidarity as when laying hands on one person in an act of pastoral care. There are two linguistic clues in the text that confirm this originally personal character of the benediction.

Firstly, in verse 27 the expression '*put* my name *on*' the Israelites suggests a personal *touch*. The Hebrew verb *sūm* followed by the preposition *'al* has the connotation of 'placing something on' someone or something (*sūm* 2008:963). In Genesis 48:18, when the aged Jacob blessed Ephraim and Manasseh, the same expression ('lay your hand upon') describes that one-on-one blessing.

Secondly, the suffixes to the verbs and prepositions are in the second person *singular*. Linguistically, this benediction is addressed to a single 'you', which suggests that its original setting was the intimate sphere of a caring servant of God laying hands on someone in need, touching that person with compassion to 'efficaciously confer' God's mercy and power.

In New Testament times, rabbis were occasionally approached by parents on the Day of Atonement to bless their children (Weber 1979:15). In the Synoptic Gospels, we read of people who brought infants to Jesus for him to 'touch' them (Mk 10:13; Lk 18:15) or to 'lay hands on them and pray' (Mt 19:13). Mark 10:16 says: 'And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them'.

The praxis of blessing among wounded people

The title of this section is 'The praxis of blessing *among* wounded people' and not 'The praxis of blessing wounded people'. This is to honour the fundamental emphasis of Numbers 6:27 that believers are mere servants and instruments of the God who blesses.[16] Instead of dealing separately with three of the remaining dimensions of the praxis matrix (Contextual Understanding, Discernment for Action and Spirituality), I integrate them in this section by reflecting on encounters between priestly agents and wounded people. The discussion is structured according to the five aspects of blessing in the Aaronic benediction that have been identified in Point 3, but before embarking on that exploration, two introductory explanations are necessary: on gender and spirituality.

Gender and priestly praxis

As pointed out, the clerical captivity of the Aaronic benediction can be overcome through an emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, but it is also essential to overcome its gender exclusiveness. Numbers 6:24–26 reveals its rootedness in patriarchal culture in three ways: The grammatical forms of the verbs and pronouns in the Hebrew text portray God as male (*his* face, etc.); secondly, it addresses a male beneficiary, since in Hebrew the suffixes to the verbs (bless *you*, protect *you*, etc.) mark the recipient as male. And thirdly, the 'sons of Aaron' who were mandated to pronounce it were all men, anointed into a hereditary patriarchal priesthood.

All of this, however, need not make the Aaronic benediction a toxic statement. It is possible to counter its male exclusivist

14.For this reason, the priestly blessing [*birkat kohanim*] is also called the *nesi'at kappayim* [lifting up of hands], see Goldberg (1957:15).

15.In the Jewish tradition a priest had to be male, as in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

16.This follows the insight of Samuel Wells (2018) that Christian ministry is primarily being with and doing with, instead of doing for.

bias by reading it 'against the grain'.[17] This involves imagining God's feminine face – blessing, protecting, looking kindly, acting mercifully and dispensing peace. This is not difficult, as all of us experienced such a blessing presence first from our mothers (and mother figures) and – if we were fortunate – also from our fathers (and father figures). The feminine faces of God in Scripture – compassionate, gathering, mourning, giving birth, midwifing, nurturing, protecting and care-giving – all embody a blessing presence[18] and they need to be made audible and visible when pronouncing this benediction. The following is one way to do that:

> The LORD bless you and protect you;
>
> The LORD make her motherly face to shine upon you, and be merciful to you;
>
> The LORD lift up his fatherly face upon you, and give you peace.

Secondly, the praxis of the messianic community of Jesus of Nazareth is not inherently or exclusively masculine in nature. As argued earlier, at baptism Christians are ordained into an inclusive priesthood of *all* believers, in which women and men are partners in ministry and mission. But it should be acknowledged that, in many churches, the faces shining consistently with priestly compassion on wounded people have always been mainly women's faces. To give recognition to that, an authentic praxis of priestly mission requires churches not only to ordain women in all offices, but to maximise their role in its implementation.

Priestly spirituality

In light of the width and depth of woundedness in (and around) South African churches, it is crucial that a distinctly Christian spirituality should shape our contextual understanding and discernment for action. This task cannot be approached by merely listing statistics of 'casualties' or expressing sympathy from a safe distance. It can only be driven by a spirituality of lament, as articulated by Katongole (2017:109, 234): 'There are things that can be seen only by eyes that have cried'. A spirituality-shaped priestly epistemology – as a way of knowing – should be characterised by identification and empathetic lament:

> For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? (Jr 8:21–22)

By so doing, we admit that the wounds of others are our wounds; that we cannot enter into the suffering of wounded communities as the healthy ones who have come to 'solve their problems'. Only if we deal honestly and maturely with our own wounds, while coming face to face with other wounded people, can we grow into 'wounded healers', as classically formulated by Henri Nouwen (1972:79–96).

17.This expression, which originated with Walter Benjamin, involves 'reading the text in the name of the "vanquished," those whose fate is visible only negatively, in the form of the text's absences, gaps, and repressions' (Bewes 2010:16).

18.Among the numerous women biblical scholars who have developed these ideas, I mention Mollenkott (1984) and Claassens (2012).

Priestly encounters with wounded people

Some brief definitions are needed at the outset. To be *wounded* means that one has experienced some form of violence that inflicted hurt and left scars. To be *vulnerable* means that one is exposed to danger, even if it has not happened. To be *incidentally* wounded is to experience a one-off violent incident. To be *systemically* wounded is to have experienced repeated violence and to remain vulnerable to further violence. These different levels of woundedness need to be taken into account when reflecting on encounters in and with wounded communities. As stated, the rest of this section addresses human participation in the five dimensions of blessing as expressed in the Aaronic benediction.

Priestly praxis as sharing abundance

How can God's blessing, conceived as sharing material abundance, long life, fertility and prosperity, be embodied among economically wounded people, living in poverty and blighted by high levels of unemployment? How can a congregation become an instrument of abundance among economically wounded people? Starting with its own members and extending the view to neighbourhoods and broader society, the starting point of priestly praxis must be to *notice* wounded people, build relationships of trust, and grapple with them to understand their specific kind of woundedness – and the factors contributing to it. Priestly praxis is 'being with' – which means an attentive, listening presence (Wells 2018).

In an attempt to share abundance among economically wounded people, the first trap to avoid is handing out dependency-creating aid. If a congregation does have savings, then giving ongoing aid directly to wounded families and communities that are trapped in poverty often makes them lose their dignity and self-respect, trapping them in dependency.[19] There are no quick fixes to poverty. The overall approach should be asset-based, affirming the cultural and economic resources present in a community that have to be owned, affirmed and developed by the community itself. Government social grants do meet basic needs, and a strong argument has been made for a basic income grant, but in this regard the most important contribution of priestly praxis seems to be in the field of skills development and personal empowerment, engaging in educational processes with unemployed people, such as helping them to get an ID document, enrol for a course, write a curriculum vitae, apply for a job, do voluntary work to gain new skills, or plant a vegetable garden. Such initiatives could provide life-giving (blessing) alternatives to hopelessness that do not create (or perpetuate) dependency among economically wounded people.

Another trap to avoid in attempting to share abundance among economically wounded people is to preach a prosperity gospel that makes unrealistic promises and raises false hopes. The blessing of God does enhance abundant life and a flourishing existence, but the 'wildly popular Christian message of spiritual, physical, and financial mastery' with its

19.This case was made very convincingly by Dambisa Moyo in *Dead Aid* (Moyo 2009).

'faith, wealth, health, and victory' gospel (Davison 2014:30) does not produce the rooted and sustainable wholeness envisaged in God's blessing work.

Priestly praxis as protection from harm

One of the key material blessings that are 'efficaciously conferred' in the Aaronic benediction is God's protection (Nm 6:24). The challenge facing priestly mission praxis is to find ways of embodying God's protective care for wounded people. And the most wounded people needing protection in South Africa are women, children and the elderly.

In South Africa, women are not only systemically wounded but actually killed at an alarming rate, usually by men who know them, and often in their own homes. Domestic violence, as defined in South African law, includes emotional, verbal, psychological, sexual and economic abuse, damage to property, harassment and stalking (Brodie 2020:67), which means that there is no area of life in which women do not need protection from men. Femicide (or female homicide) refers to the killing of women in general and *intimate* femicide to the killing of women 'by a current or former husband [*or*] boyfriend, same-sex partner, or rejected would-be lover' (Brodie 2020:23). The femicide rate in South Africa, nearly 3000 murders per year, is five to six times higher than the world average (Brodie 2020:167, 190). Kobo (2018:182) expresses the pain contained in these statistics by saying that they 'expose the depth of fragmentation in a black home; how capitalism creates monsters out of husbands, fathers and arguably, mothers and children. This is the struggle of black humanity'.

The major cause of this truly horrific situation is patriarchy (male supremacy), exacerbated by centuries of land dispossession, economic exploitation and racist abuse, which has produced men (both white and black) who unleash disproportionate violence on women. Ministry to overcome patriarchal violence, ranging from subtle to brutal, among South African men should be a top priority for churches. That is clearly a project that will take generations, but while it continues, there is an urgent need to provide protection for women survivors of violence – shelters, places of safety, interim housing and legal assistance (Brodie 2020:202). Other protective steps that Brodie suggests include street lighting, better training of police officers, tighter gun control and better media reporting on gender-based violence (Brodie 2020:206–208). These measures are government responsibilities, beyond the ambit of individual churches, but, acting together with NGOs, they should engage in effective advocacy with authorities for such protections and try to mobilise the private sector to commit their social responsibility contributions in this area.

A distinctive feature of woman abuse in South Africa is the phenomenon called (with deep irony) 'blessers': Middle-aged professional men who, in exchange for sexual favours, 'bless' young women with money and gifts. This is a form of sex work, which churches should ideally not address in a moralistic way, provided it is consensual and the young woman is not underage. When encountering young women who are in such relationships, a blessing (not blesser) praxis would strive to help them leave it,[20] but in any event, protect them against male predators by advising them against unsafe sex, which would expose them to contracting sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and hepatitis B.

The alarming increase in teenagers who become pregnant, some as young as 12, raises a range of other protection issues, particularly the lack of parental supervision and inadequate sex education in families, churches and schools. A priestly praxis in response to this crisis would have to be interdisciplinary (involving medical, educational, psychological and legal partners) and be directed at multiple audiences (children, parents, teachers, congregations).

Priestly praxis as compassion for the suffering

As explained in Point 3, the embodiment of God's shining face (v. 25) among wounded people is expressed in actions of mercy and caring help after violence has occurred, as in the parable of the compassionate Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37). On a personal level, priestly praxis means helping wounded people live with the scars that others have afflicted on them. It means training priestly agents with skills in trauma counselling, not just for one-on-one sessions, but also for families traumatised by experiences of violence. This requires serious reform in the curricula for training ordained ministers, but also the training of a wide range of church members as trauma counsellors, so that priestly blessing will not be a series of liturgical *moments* but become a sustained and life-enhancing *movement* across communities.

The conducting of funerals to comfort wounded (grieving) families has always been part of the priestly praxis of churches, which will continue. However, in the interest of building flourishing families, congregations need to initiate a process of reducing funeral expenses. Funerals have become extremely expensive, and some families incur huge debts to give their loved ones a 'decent' funeral, often at the expense of other priorities, such as the education of their children.[21] The dignified simplicity (and much lower cost) of funerals in Jewish and Muslim communities are examples to emulate, but an initiative to reduce funeral costs will have to come from parents. They need to exercise priestly servant leadership by giving clear (and binding) instructions on the format of their funerals to protect their offspring from unnecessary expenses and to focus instead on life-enhancing priorities. Such a move would constitute the final priestly act of a parent to comfort and protect their descendants, not by 'ruling from the grave', as the saying goes, but instead by *serving* from the grave. They would thereby commit

20.Mangoedi (2023:145) found that Black women who engage in transactional sex are often victims of systemic poverty, but she argues that their lives can be liberated, restored, and transformed, provided churches take seriously their experiences of poverty, abuse, inequality and of being Black women.

21.The empirical research of Case and Menendez (2011:372) found that 'households are taking what, in other circumstances, could be productive capital and using it on coffins, meat and groceries to bury their dead'. They refer to repeated calls by the South African Council of Churches for 'appropriate and affordable' funerals.

themselves to be an ancestor who does not demand sacrifices from descendants, but protects and comforts them – in the funeral and beyond – from a position of eternal rest in the hands of God.

A specific form of priestly praxis required among deeply traumatised families, who are struggling to come to terms with the violent death of a loved one, is the practice of a cleansing ritual. In African cultures, similar to ancient Hebrew culture, a person's unnatural death defiles the ground and disturbs the cosmic spiritual environment, thereby creating unresolved trauma in the minds of a whole community.[22] Such defilement calls for an act of cleansing to restore a sense of cosmic equilibrium in the environment and peace in the wounded minds of the afflicted. Priestly praxis of this kind has been carried out by South African Christian leaders, for example, at places where the bodies of apartheid victims were discovered and at the mine in Stilfontein where a number of informal miners had died underground.[23] Creating liturgical formulas and formulating a theology to underpin this comforting priestly praxis is a priority for the churches that have not yet developed such instruments.

As the exposition of the Aaronic benediction has shown, blessing is not a 'thing' that can be handed out; it is a divine gift in which one participates by receiving it together as a community of wounded people. Priestly praxis therefore requires an epicletic ('beseeching') and invocatory posture, waiting on God and expecting God's presence (Davison 2014:20, 91). Intercession is therefore a key dimension of comforting priestly praxis. Praying for change in people's lives is a protest against the status quo, a faith statement that their present situation is not inevitable or unchangeable, thereby sharing hope with a family and community. Intercession requires humble, epicletic mission praxis: 'Come Creator Spirit, change this situation according to your divine will, and use us by your Holy Spirit to bring about that change'. To ensure that intercession is an authentic priestly praxis, done in the spirit of Jesus, it should ideally be accompanied by the hands-on compassionate touch that he modelled.

Another instance of priestly compassion needed by wounded people is emergency relief in response to disasters like floods, shack fires or drought. In a country whose government departments responsible for disaster relief are struggling to cope, civil society organisations like churches need to step into the vacuum to care for people in need. Providing tangible comfort to people wounded by a disaster is certainly an aspect of priestly mission, in which many Christians engage spontaneously – opening their church buildings and homes to displaced families and handing out blankets, clothes and food – but since the scale and frequency of such events are likely to increase because of climate change and increasing amounts of unsafe housing in informal settlements, emergency responses need to be professionalised in order to be effective. Christians who are committed to this priestly praxis should motivate Christian business people and their companies to fund the establishment of multidisciplinary ecumenical organisations dedicated to this task, in cooperation with international initiatives.[24] Another option is to give active support to a well-organised relief organisation like Gift of the Givers Foundation, which is Muslim-initiated but welcomes support from individuals and businesses of all faith communities.[25]

In conclusion, the links between God's shining face, God's compassion for the suffering, and a journey of pilgrimage that came to light in 3.3, should shape priestly praxis as the persistent-and-patient accompaniment of people towards greater humanity and communal harmony in the midst of all the challenges facing them.

Priestly praxis as dignifying restoration

Flowing directly from the foregoing, the 'bottom line' of the Aaronic benediction is the divine gift of peace [*shalom*], which refers to a state of affairs in which there is positive harmony and wholeness; not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of holistic well-being. A pronounced benediction is a moment that gives rise to movement, which leads to a state of affairs. Whereas the public and communal dimensions of peace are emphasised by the prophetic and royal dimensions of mission as liberation, the dimensions of inner peace and personal wholeness are the preserve of priestly praxis.

An encompassing vision of peace-with-justice is the necessary horizon for a recovery of the notion of blessing in Christian understandings of mission, but as mentioned before, the Aaronic benediction is written in the second person singular and therefore has a deeply personal dimension. The recovery of God-given *personal* dignity through encountering the uplifted face of the living God is desperately needed in wounded communities. The message of Steve Biko (1978:29) – that black humanity had been reduced to an empty shell and that it was necessary to 'pump back life into' it and 'infuse it with pride and dignity' – is as relevant as ever. That was the gospel of Black Consciousness and African dignity, intended to overcome the 'inferiority feelings, distrust of themselves and self-hate' (Adam 1973:155) integral to a 'colonised mind'. Sometimes it is said that men feel 'entitled' to shoot and kill their wives:

> [*B*]ecause they feel undermined, because they feel like they are losing their position of authority in our society, because they are struggling to get or keep a job and it is hard not to be the 'provider', because women are taking men's jobs, because women's independence threatens their status quo. (Brodie 2020:209)

Kobo (2018:51–54) points out that black women originally became targets of black male anger not because they threatened male authority but because the 'angry, resentful, broken man' produced by apartheid presented 'a site conducive for patriarchy to flourish' and those angry men

22.This is clear from passages like Genesis 4:10 and Deuteronomy 21:23.

23.I gratefully acknowledge the help of Bishop Paul Verryn, who shared this information with me from his experience of participating in such cleansing rituals.

24.Many churches and ecumenical bodies have set up organisations committed to international disaster relief, such as Caritas, Misereor, World Renew, World Relief, and others.

25.See the Gift of the Givers Foundation website at giftofthegivers.org.

vented their anger on the women around them. In a similar fashion, Baloyi (2020:1) traces the roots of negative phenomena such as mob justice and xenophobia to a woundedness that resulted in black self-hatred and an inferiority complex. Even though this personal dimension does not adequately explain the causes of the patriarchal violence just mentioned, it contains a large element of truth. It challenges churches to develop a priestly (dignifying and peace-instilling) praxis to transform this inner woundedness in black communities – among women and men – in the quest for a 'true humanity' and for a society 'with a human face' (Biko 1978:47, 87–98). It similarly challenges churches to develop a priestly (peace-making) praxis to transform the inner guilt, shame, denialism and indifference in white communities – among women and men – as part of that same quest.[26] This inner peace is a dignifying self-affirmation that is not self-centred but represents the 'rest' to which Jesus invites all the wounded and which involves a self-denying commitment to take up the yoke of his liberating mission (Mt 11:28).

The peace of God that is 'efficaciously conferred' by the Aaronic benediction does not fall from the sky. It grows gradually, as believers collaborate to develop a receptive openness to the *moment* of benediction in worship, a creative participation in the *movement* of peace-making through coordinated priestly praxis, and a grateful entering into the *maturity* of an inner peace that is both self-affirming and self-denying. The LORD blesses believers into personal and interpersonal dignity to mobilise them into the struggle for justice and to set them on the road of comprehensive peace.

Formation for beatific leadership

If a Christian congregation is to become a blessing *movement* in society, visionary priestly leadership needs to perform the blessing *moment* in worship, so as to facilitate beatific praxes to flow from it in the 'liturgy after the liturgy'. It is the task of theological education and ministerial formation programmes to 'produce' leaders who are imbued with such a visionary priestly spirituality, skilled in compassionate interaction with wounded people, equipped with a robust counter-cultural theology of mission, and moved by the Spirit of God into action.

Conclusion

Priestly praxis requires a *diasporic* sense of mission, in which Christians understand themselves as seeds scattered in society, being helpful and fruitful, not using their resources to conquer or dominate, but to mediate God's peace-giving blessing among wounded people. The huge worldwide increase in migration has created a new awareness of Christian faith as 'scattered' (diasporic) by nature:

> My claim would be that our status as aliens and strangers invites us to think about diaspora and hybridity not as marginal or incidental aspects of Christian faith, but as central to it … Thus we are sojourners, continuously living a diasporic existence, thrust into a world that is in some ways not our home. (Yong 2014:260–261)

26.For some reflections on this quest for White liberation, see Kritzinger (2008) and Van Wyngaard (2019).

If all the families of the earth are to be blessed through the descendants of Abraham (Gn 12:1–3), then the Jesus movement, as co-heir to that promise, is called to be beatific – being blessed while sharing blessing – wherever they are scattered and in everything they do. As the Aaronic benediction shows, God's blessing actualises abundance, protection, compassion, restoration and peace through the transformative agency of blessed believers. Such a priestly ethos should characterise every form of mission praxis, whether it has an evangelising, community-building, liberating, reconciling or earthkeeping intent. The wide reach of priestly compassion was well articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr (King 2015):

> On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. (p. 177)

Believers who experience God's blessing are called to bind up the wounds of individual victims *and* to restructure the edifices that keep on producing more. A wounded society cries out for such a liberating beatific presence.

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