



CHRISTIANITY AND PAID WORK

The parable we've just listened to from Luke's gospel is pretty odd. There is a manager who is about to be sacked. He goes to all who owe his employer money and lets them off with paying less. To our surprise, the employer commends the manager for his shrewdness. What's going on? Perhaps the manager hopes that the debtors will later return the favour and be helpful to him after he loses his job.

This parable serves as a link of sorts between the stories of the Prodigal Son (in the preceding chapter) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (later in the same chapter). Just like the prodigal son, the manager has squandered what was entrusted to him. Although this manager does not repent (as does the prodigal son) or act virtuously (like Lazarus), he nonetheless does something with the rich man's wealth that reverses the existing order of things. Luke's gospel likes to use this approach, and reversals of status are usually to be found when Jesus and the kingdom of God appear.

It has been suggested that the manager reduced his own commission in the debts owed and that this is what is being commended. Others say that a pragmatic boss is simply commending the manager for responding shrewdly to a difficult circumstance.

Well, make of it what you can. What it did for me was to turn my thoughts to a subject that has interested me for years – that of selling our labour, of working for money.

I have often been struck by the great disconnect between much church talk and the world of paid work. I'd go so far as to say that the church has spectacularly fallen short in its duty to take seriously the world of paid work in which the bulk of its sons and daughters labour.

There have been exceptions, but not many. A 1981 Papal Encyclical addressed this theme. Theologians have at times written about Christian faith and paid work, but much of it is unhelpful. A great deal of the so-called 'theology of work' or 'the spirituality of work' is pretty weak and sometimes patronising. For the large part, written by those who are not acquainted with the demands, stresses and compromises of selling their labour.

Some examples would be funny were they not seriously said: in one book I saw this injunction: *'Employees are to work as though God were their boss'* (well, many of us have worked for bosses who do seem to think they are God..).

And I read the slightly reassuring claim that *'Exploitation of workers by employers does not escape God's notice'* No doubt that acts as an effective break on all workplace exploitation. We can stand down the trades unions and strike out all that legislation.

Too many of those who write or speak about Christian faith and paid work are not qualified to do so, and the Christians that are qualified by their experience of being working people often lack the voice, the encouragement or the confidence to do so.

If they were to try and remedy this astonishing silence, what might church writers and commentators contribute to this? A popular starting point is to do with the attitude and behaviour to be commended to Christians in their work places: honesty, reliability, conscientiousness, for example. In other words, be a good employee and don't steal the pencils.

But it needs to go further, and show a deeper grasp of how paid employment can affect people in bad ways. These are structural questions: how the human person at work is seen too often only as a means to profit and production; how they – we – are expendable; what kind of work – and working practices – truly affirm the dignity of the human person.

For a tradition pretty hot on individual sin and guilt there is little attention to structural and corporate sin. It is as if systems and organisations are somehow incapable, of themselves, of being bad. And this after the endless litany of scandals let alone all the other examples of how businesses and organisations (even governments) can chose to harm people, communities and our planet.

The ways in which sin crops up in the world of work are often cloaked, hidden behind ‘expediency’ and target setting, and the pressures (they are in fact idolatries) to always please bosses, shareholders, regulatory bodies.

Many of you here will have experience of the burden placed on so many men and women throughout their working lives by excessive workloads, long hours and the drive to hit those ‘vital’ performance targets. You will sense your expendability, and might feel like a hamster on a wheel that never rests.

Perhaps some of you find all this too fanciful. Your work is, or was, comfortable and manageable; your bosses humane; the pressures not great. You are fortunate. It is not like that for most working people here and around the globe.

Ken Loach’s soon-to-be-released new film *Sorry we missed you*, targets the zero hours contract world and the terrible struggle so many of our fellow citizens face to survive.

As it always does, language reveals things. Calling vast warehouses where staff are paid minimally, are run ragged and penalised for toilet use ‘*fulfilment centres*’ makes George Orwell seem tame.

Karl Marx is out of fashion (he was never popular with mainstream Christians) but much of his analysis of the harm and injustices of the world of work (premised as so much of it is on maximising financial profit, privately owned) ring true, not least with some of the insights of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

For the bulk of humanity, paid work is the great shaper of their experience and identity and whether it is a grim cycle of low paid work which never quite allows escape from debt, or some broadly tolerable activity providing some degree of security and routine, or one which provides lavish rewards by way of status and pay, it is for everyone at some time or other a form of bondage. As Rousseau observed ‘Man is born free but is everywhere in chains’. And many of those shackles are economic, closely related to our work.

The Christian claim is that God so loves us that God’s very self somehow entered our human home and flesh in order that we ‘may not perish but have eternal life’. Don’t take this as a promissory note about a future salvation but as an indication of what things ought to be like in this eternal moment, today. And, if it interests you, as it interests me, perhaps we should begin to give further thought to the world of paid work, varied as it is, and complex as it is, in order to better explore what being Christian in all this might be.

Many of us will work within these systems and organisations and at times wonder what to do, how to act, when faced with conflicts and what we regard as immoral trends, fearful as many of us are about speaking out. Don’t be ashamed if you are uncertain, even paralysed. It is entirely understandable. I have found myself in such circumstances.

I have sometimes thought Nicodemus a helpful patron. He first makes an oblique and shadowy appearance (you remember that ‘he came to Jesus by night’) to ask for advice. He was not ready to accept the reply, and slipped away again. But that was not the end of him. He makes two further appearances: once to speak in

Christ's defence at his trial, and later with Joseph of Arimathea to help prepare Jesus' body for burial. We should always be wary of making other people's actions serve our interpretive purposes, but Nicodemus looks very reassuringly like a helpful model of a growing consciousness.

For those of you not at ease amidst the powers and principalities of our day (and paid work for many of us brings us into direct contact with them) then take heart from this thoughtful Pharisee who moves from being uncertain and keeping his head down and identity hidden, to discovering a greater boldness.

It seems commonplace today to hear people agree that the trade unions got too big for their boots and needed slapping down. I prefer to think of them at their best, arguing for work place fairness and playing an astonishing role in improving working conditions for millions of men and women. Some non-conformist Christian bodies played a part in that, but on the whole the church didn't.

We need an income to survive. For most of us, that involves paid work, the selling of our labour.

I hope that if you are of working age and in a job, that you experience it positively: as useful work, appropriately rewarded, making good use of your skills and resulting in things that contribute to the

common good, where you are stretched but not broken, and valued and supported and not harmed.

If not, it may be time to plan for something else, and to seek help in that. Remember that claim that many of the stories in the gospels make, about God's Kingdom involving reversals and change, and where new freedom follows. If you wish to talk these things over please let me know. If there is enough interest we could easily arrange an occasion to meet and talk as a small group.

We're quicker today than in the past to spot any infringement of our rights as citizens, yet so many are caught up in paid work which exacts a high price, limits our creativity and has us jumping through hoops like performing circus animals. It doesn't seem to me much like human flourishing. It doesn't seem to fit with much of what we say and claim in church on Sundays. If you find yourself caught up in these patterns, maybe it is time to count the cost and to decide on priorities.

The New Testament speaks of the 'glorious liberty of the children of God', and John has Jesus say "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Too much of paid work fails on these counts, and for too many of our sisters and brothers.

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