

St Bartholomew's, Ducklington
Making a Difference - through Work
January 8th 2012

This is the third year of Living Faith, the vision offered by the Bishop of Oxford, to inspire our life and ministry as a church.

Year 1, the theme was "sustaining the sacred centre".

Year 2, it was "making disciples"

and now in 2012, "making a difference in the world"

Through the year we will explore this theme asking how we might make a difference

- in our community
- through our charitable activities
- through our work

We will include occasional interviews on a Sunday morning during the year to introduce people in our congregation and talk about their work - under the title, This Time Tomorrow (TTT)

Henry Cooke

What will you be doing this time tomorrow?

Do you enjoy what you do at work?

Why this job? Why not become a policeman or drive a bus?

What purpose does it fulfil? Why is this job worthwhile?

Do you ever pray at work?

Good Work

First impressions of the Bible may make you think that work is a bad thing. In Genesis it is cursed "toil" - hard labour. The NT tells us that we are not saved by our good works (Eph 2:8,9).

But there are more than 600 references to work in the Bible - the book is full of people who do all kinds of jobs. Jesus was a carpenter, the disciples were fishermen, Paul was a tentmaker.

There is a difference between a job and work. We may take a job working for £6 an hour stacking shelves at Sainsburys but work is something else. Work is not just about getting paid. A lot of work isn't paid - caring for an elderly relative, cooking meals and keeping a home glued together. But a menial task on minimum wage can be "work".

It's all about attitude - what we think we are doing when we are working. It is about aligning who we are with what we do - and so it is a spiritual challenge. Good work - stacking shelves or auctioning silver - comes from inside. One way of thinking about the spiritual aspect of work is through the idea of vocation. Martin Buber (Jewish writer) says that vocation is "a response to life's calling to engage reality out of what is deepest and most sacred in us, especially our giftedness". Frederick Buechner describes it as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's great hunger meet".

Briefly let's explore three aspects of vocation.

1. Calling

Do you feel "called" to your work? - a sense that something or someone outside yourself (and I don't mean your boss) invites you to do the work you do? Sadly through the years the idea of a vocation has been badly distorted.

The Catholic distortion (as Os Guinness describes it) is to elevate the spiritual over the secular - to consider religious service as superior to any other. What, when I was growing up, was called "full time Christian service". In other words everyone else was, at best in "part time Christian service". This has a long tradition. Eusebius talked about two ways of life - the perfect and the permitted. Higher vs lower vocation. In time the idea of a vocation was reserved for those in religious life - everyone else just had a job.

Martin Luther, the German reformer, was scathing in his attack on this view. He said that the work of monks and priests did not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic labourer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks. For Luther the merchant or the peasant, the business person or the nurse can all do Gods work just as much as the minister or the missionary. All work is an act of faith - everyone is called by God to service.

This means that all work was sacred. Gradually, however, this was elevated into what became known as the Protestant ethic - "the man who builds a factory builds a temple" an early American president said. By the time the Industrial Revolution had taken hold the idea of a calling had all but disappeared - instead the sense that everyone has a calling was whittled down to everyone should have a job. Henry Ford claimed "Work is the salvation of the human race, morally, physically, socially." What we do became more important than who we do it for. Once we work just to satisfy ourselves (or our employers) we have let the core meaning of vocation slip - we are called first to serve God.

Our first task, then, in thinking about making a difference through our work is to restore a correct understanding of a call. For the Christian, ultimately, the call comes from God and it is Him we serve - "whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for your masters" (Col 3:23). We are first called into relationship with God so that "everything we are, everything we do and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service." (Os Guinness)

This may be difficult for some - we tend to be cautious or uncertain these days about suggesting that we have heard God speak to us. But, however you may explain it, there is something about the call of vocation that taps into the mystery that is life itself. "I have to write" one will say, "I can't imagine doing anything else". The key is to respond to the call ... to follow through. Response comes from the Latin *respondere* - which means "to promise, to engage oneself". And, importantly, the root of this word is *sponte* from which we get the English word "spontaneous". Our response is not a calculation - there should be no if, buts or maybes - it is an unconditional, wholehearted commitment to serve God.

Unfortunately, too often, the ego - self-interest - get's in the way. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist made the distinction between individualism (the assertion of the self in our drive to make a mark in the world) and individuation (the emergence of our true identity in response to vocation). This deserves careful, and prayerful consideration - and more time that is available in this sermon.

2. Ability

Henry didn't become a policeman or a bus driver. I could never have become a ballet dancer and early in my career, after completing a degree in electrical engineering, I realised I would never be a good engineer. It takes time to find our vocation, to discover what we are good at - "to do what we are".

This is particularly difficult in today's work world. We take whatever job we can find. It is hard trying to "be yourself" in a workplace that is doing its best to make you someone else. Did you read the headline in the newspaper some time ago: "Feeling Tense? You are probably doing your job". Too many jobs these days are not big enough for the people that fill them. They only allowed us to bring a small part of ourselves into the workplace and this is a source of frustration and stress.

Whatever our circumstances, if the idea of vocation is right, we must try not to lose sight of how our work - whatever the circumstances - is a place where we can grow. We can all acquire new skills, develop wisdom. Whatever our situation the workplace can teach us about ourselves. Pay attention to our reactions, make more deliberate choices - learning when to persist and when to desist. As Paul said to the Romans: "Let your behaviour change, modeled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do" (Rom 12:2).

3. Purpose

Vocation is a response to a call that matches our ability and challenges us to grow. But to what are we called? Firstly, to be creative - to shape the world, bring beauty into the workplace. Use your imagination, play a little. But there is more. Since we serve God our purpose is clear: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation ... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation". That's our true purpose at work - the ministry of reconciliation. We cannot read this as a call that only applies to those in "full time Christian service". Paul makes no exception. As Christians we are all "ministers of reconciliation". We have the attitude of mind that puts this task (in brackets) on our CV alongside our job title.

Jesus prayed to the Father "I do not pray that you take them out of the world (Jn 17:15). We are "in" the world - and nowhere is that more than at work. But I am in the world only to the extent that I criticise it. Otherwise I become "of" the world - to be uncritical is to be "of" the world. So, as Christians we are called to live reflectively and prophetically. Prophets interfere - they disrupt the status quo. And this is a matter of life and death. Jeremiah, the OT prophet found himself called to "root" and "uproot" - root life and uproot death.

Of course, work like this and you won't be popular! Which is why it takes great skill and patience to make a difference in the workplace. It is worth reminding ourselves that it is often not the big things that matter. Few of us are involved in manufacturing land mines or producing pornographic films. It's the small things that make a difference - a short conversation that might give someone else hope, or set them free to do what they believe is right. A question raised at the right time in a committee meeting.

Sometime we may need to take the dilemmas we face in the workplace into a reflective space (on the job or offline) in order to decide how to act - how to say "no" to the enemies of life.

Questionnaire

So, as we begin this year in which we hope to make a difference in the world, let us remember our vocation - we are called, equipped and mandated by God whatever our job description or role. What a difference it would make if "this time tomorrow" (TTT) we turned up at our place of work determined to make it a better place - to bring life into its dark shadows - to be ministers of reconciliation.

In order to get a snapshot of our experience of work, and help us plan our ministry with one another this year you are invited to complete a questionnaire - either online at the church website, or on paper (at the doors).

We all have a vocation - we are called, equipped and purposeful in the work we do. Remember, in the end we will hear the words of our Lord, "Well done, good and faithful servant ... come and share in my happiness".

Dave Adams
January 8th, 2012