

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly 20 March 2011 by The Revd Hugh Valentine
Lent 2 Year A John 3.1-17

what about the workers?

As every industry knows, it is always possible to saturate the market. That seems pretty much the case with saints and saints days. Seemingly, not a day arrives which is not assigned to some martyr, consecrated virgin, teacher of the faith or Significant Happening.

And if you are one of those self-conscious religious writers, you make sure that when you come to pen the introduction to your book, you do so on a carefully chosen day and so are able to sign it off with your name, followed by a prominent feast day.

Indeed, if amongst your friends you have the seriously religious, you may well get post cards and letters reverentially headed *Corpus Christi*, or *Perpetua, Felicity and Companions* or, if they are writing to you today, *Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, AD687*.

Last week, notables included Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, and Cyril, 4th century bishop and teacher. Tomorrow we Anglicans celebrate Thomas Cranmer, martyred in 1556 and later in the week the wider church keeps the feast of Oscar Romero, martyred in 1980.

But the feast I want to draw your attention to was celebrated yesterday: the feast of Joseph of Nazareth. March the 19th has been dedicated to Joseph from at least the 10th century. But it was in 1955 that his feast day was modified to *St Joseph the Worker*. It is said that this change was instituted by Pope Pius XII in response to the May Day celebrations sponsored by the Communists for the ordinary workers of the world.

I keep the feast of Joseph the Worker because my own vocation to serve as a priest arose in the context of my ordinary, paid, work and, with the support of the church, led me to become a 'priest in secular

employment' as that same church rather sadly describes it [I say 'sadly' because, really, there can be no distinction in the Christian mind between 'sacred' and 'secular', for all is God's and God is in all].

And I also keep the feast because I have a great interest in the questions raised by Christian faith and paid work, and very much lament the fact that much of the church does not. So I hope you might let me, this morning, 'take to the hustings' as it were and pitch – if not a manifesto – a least a few thoughts about Christian faith and the business of selling our labour, in honour of Joseph the Worker.

I mentioned religious writers, and God knows the publishers lists and second hand bookshops are full of them. But serious treatment of the ordinary business of earning a living is surprisingly rare.

True, professional theologians have at times written about Christian faith and paid work, but much of it is frankly unhelpful. Too much of the so-called 'theologies of' or 'the spirituality of' work is pretty sentimental, and often patronising, for the large part written by those unacquainted with the demands, stresses, compromises and challenges of selling their labour in industrial, commercial, private and public settings.

Some examples would be funny were they not seriously said: this injunction, for example: 'Employees are to work as though God were their boss' (well, many of us have worked for bosses who seem to *think* they are God); and the ever-so slightly reassuring 'Exploitation of workers by employers does not escape God's notice' - which no doubt acts as a very effective break on all workplace exploitation.

The situation too often seems to be that many of those who write or speak about Christian faith and paid work are not really qualified to do so, and the Christians that are qualified by their experience of being Christian people at work too often lack the voice, the encouragement, the motivation or the confidence to do so.

Now, if we were to try and remedy this astonishing silence of a generally talkative church, what might we say were the main issues?

One - the most obvious and the one most popular with writers on this subject of work and faith - 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. So far, so good.

Others matters - less commonly (indeed hardly ever) raised from the Christian perspective - are to do with structural questions: how the human person is seen too often only as a means to profit and production; the expendability of persons; what kind of work – and working practices – best affirm the dignity of the human person?; the routine moral challenges of obedience to corporate demands; the tricky question of ends and means.

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

The manifestations of sin that crop up in the world of work are often heavily cloaked. For example, the claims of 'expediency', productivity and profit; the pressures (they are in fact idolatries) to always please bosses, shareholders, regulatory bodies; 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 or profit targets.

Being 'in' work has often been seen as the best means of being 'out' of poverty. That remains true to some degree, but low wages are common in this well-off country of ours and some of the lowest rates of hourly pay are a scandal: a recent report claimed that of children living in poverty here, 1.7m live in working households, more than the 1.1m living in unemployed households.

It is in the field of employment that discrimination by sex, age and ethnicity is most commonly found. And many stress-related illnesses, not least depression, have their origin in the workplace.

Karl Marx may be out of fashion (he has always, of course, been out of fashion with church authorities) 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 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 creativity and routine, or one which provides lavish rewards by way of status and pay and pension pots, it is for everyone at sometime 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 writer of John's Gospel reminds us this morning of something fundamental to the claims of all the gospels: that God so loves us that God's very self somehow entered our human home in order that we 'may not

perish but have eternal life'. Let us not 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. And, should it interest you, as it interests me, perhaps we might give further thought to the world of paid work, varied as it surely is, and complex as it is, in order to explore what the Christian witness in and to it ought to be.

Let me repeat an earlier claim: the church, the saints and theologians, the writers of religious books, the priests and bishops, the faithful members of the church – we have all failed to address this position of the human person in the context of paid work, a position that gets more compromised and clouded as businesses get bigger and markets get ever more competitive, as persons become more expendable and as pay gaps seem endlessly to widen.

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 or priorities or actions, fearful as many of us are about speaking out. Interestingly, in such situations, I have always thought Nicodemus,

of whom we heard this morning, a helpful patron. He first makes an oblique and shady appearance (you will remember that 'he came to Jesus by night' as we heard) and he sought advice. He was not ready to accept the reply, and slipped away again. But that is not the end of him. He makes two further appearances – only in John's Gospel: once to speak in Christ's defence at his trial, and later with Joseph of Arimathea to help prepare Jesus' body for burial. We must always be wary of making other people's actions serve our interpretive purposes. But Nicodemus seems to be 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 keeping his head down and identity hidden to discovering his true allegiance and role.

Hugh Valentine

st-james-piccadilly.org