

## Faith and the Workplace

### Leicestershire Far and Near Club, 1 October 2010

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It's a great pleasure to be with you tonight for all sorts of reasons, not least among them the fact that I'm a Leicestershire boy born and bred. Although I've been living in London now for thirty years I still have family in the county and my feeling for it is such that I can't hear the nasal drone that is Gary Lineker's voice without having the fondest thoughts of what was once home. To be invited to lecture by the Bishop of Leicester was therefore a particular pleasure and honour and one that came through the good offices of some old friends of mine, Janet and Gordon Arthur. I've known Janet and Gordon now for almost all my adult life and my wife's friendship with Janet goes back even further to when they were pushed in their prams together in Kensington Park.

A further reason for my pleasure at joining you here this evening is the opportunity to talk about something about which I care very deeply – the subject of faith in the workplace, approaching it as I do as what's variously called a Non-stipendiary Minister, a Self-supporting Minister or even Minister in Secular Employment.

I've been ordained for just over three years now and combine my role as Assistant Curate at St. Mary the Virgin Primrose Hill with my employment as the BBC Trust's Head of Performance, which means I advise the Chairman and the Board on how well the BBC is fulfilling its public service remit, a subject on which, I suspect, you may wish to bend my ear later.

The argument I want to share with you this evening is very simply stated and it's this: the church largely behaves as if the world of work is an irrelevance, as something hardly worthy of its notice and that in so doing it is missing a great opportunity for bearing witness to the truth of the gospel. As I hope to make clear, this is a question that goes right to the heart of what the church is for. In setting out this argument I'm going to first of all look at how this situation has arisen before asking what being a Christian in the workplace might mean in practice and what role the priest, or the ordained minister, might play in the world of work.

I was first asked if I might consider training for ordination some eight years ago. I can remember clearly the strength of my reaction at the time: it was a mixture of astonishment and puzzlement – why would I do such a thing? And I continued to think this way for some time. The reason was quite simple. I couldn't – and for that matter still can't – imagine myself as a parish priest.

But when it dawned on me that I might do what I am doing now – continue in full time secular employment *and* be a priest – the idea of training for ordination gradually began to make some sense. Work is, after all, a dominant feature – perhaps *the* dominant feature - of most people's lives.

Surely therefore I reasoned, the church must have a lot to say to the workplace and the workplace must have a lot to say to the church, for faith is only meaningful in so far as it is lived out in practice.

The more I thought about this the more it dawned on me how little this dialogue between church and workplace had happened in practice for me. It was as if I'd lived my life in parallel worlds – there was the me who went to church on Sunday, who prayed and read the bible and the occasional earnest work of theology and there was the me who went to work during the weekdays and struggled to make a career for myself, pay the mortgage and clothe and feed the children.

Now, I don't absolve myself of responsibility for not working harder at making the connections between the two but I couldn't avoid the conclusion that the church hadn't done much to help me do so either. Looking back over the 25 years that I had been a Christian I couldn't remember a single sermon that had said anything about faith and the workplace, precious few prayers for those at work in the secular world or any outreach designed to support those trying to live out their faith at work as well as at home and in church. How could this be?

Well, it certainly hasn't always been this way. During the middle ages the church and the world of business were much more in harmony. Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas thought very carefully about the workplace and produced theories to support it justifying private property for instance, whilst also highlighting the needs of the dispossessed, and creating the concept of a just price for goods which balanced the needs of buyers and sellers.

Public Christians were also practical business people – for instance, the Cistercians pioneered the wool industry here in Britain which was a key source of wealth in the middle ages.

But from the 16<sup>th</sup> C onwards all this started to change and the attempt to locate the world of work and business within an explicitly Christian moral framework came, over time, to be seen as an irrelevance. This ejection of theology from the world of business was best and most famously expressed by Adam Smith, the 18<sup>th</sup> C philosopher and apostle of the free market in his book *The Wealth of Nations*. In it he wrote this:

*“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages”*

And that progressively came to be the dominant view in the world of business, although the exceptions are noteworthy. As the historian Niall Ferguson points out in his most recent book, *Siegmund Warburg*, the refugee German banker who played such a key role in the post-war City of London, set out five principles of good banking, the first of which was moral standing and none of which mentioned profit. Warburg revered both the Jewish and Christian traditions and they provided the essential underpinning to his approach to banking. It is interesting that the current financial crisis is causing many to question whether the world of business shouldn't be guided by more explicit moral principles such as Warburg's but it remains to be seen whether such questioning leads to any real change of heart.

It would be unfair however, to see the church as a mere victim of heartless economic forces. I don't think there is any doubt that there is, within a lot of Christian thought, a disdain for the world of work.

This hails from our faith's very earliest years when, although it owed its birth to the Jewish tradition, it drew its first breath in a world dominated by Greek philosophy and thought which, for all its wonders, took a dualistic view of the world, one in which “pure spirit” was seen as superior to the grubby and decidedly second-rate world of the flesh. It was thus that Christianity which is, of course, at heart an incarnational religion, sought an uneasy accommodation with a worldview that held the physical world in disdain.

The legacy of this accommodation is still in evidence with many in the Church assuming that the priesthood is a “higher calling” and at the apex of a hierarchy that sees those of the caring professions – doctors, nurses, teachers and so on – at a level below it, with those engaged in actually making money and trading some way below them.

While I have no doubt that the priesthood is a vitally important calling and one that is essential to the health and well-being of mankind, so too are those of the butcher, the baker, the banker, the broadcaster and whatever the modern day equivalent of the candlestick maker is.

I realise this may sound controversial but it really shouldn't. Look around you and what do you see? Nothing other than the fruits of human labour. This building, the chairs on which you sit, the clothes on your backs, the iPhone or Blackberry or whatever in your pockets - all this has come about by the work of human hands transforming matter from one thing into another.

And this is something quite glorious and wondrous to behold, for at heart, as the theologian Christian Schumacher puts it, we are creative because God is creative. We are, quite simply, according to the biblical account, made in his image and he is above all else, the great, creator God.

The bible reflects this again and again. St. Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians (3:9) that we are “God's co-workers” in creation and it's worth remembering that Paul made his living as a tent-maker whilst at the same time being an apostle of Christ. Yes, there were non-stipendiary ministers before anyone thought of stipends!

In his teaching Jesus was always using images from the workaday world – he described farmers going out to sow (Mk 4:3-9), builders working out estimates (Lk 14:28-30), middle managers facing the sack (Lk 16:1-8) and shepherds searching for lost sheep (Lk 15:1-10). He took for granted a world of hard work, buying and selling. For sure, he called his disciples away from their workplaces for the brief period he was with them but he never once disparaged their occupations.

You see the workplace reflected in the Old Testament as well with God described with often workplace metaphors – he is variously composer, performer, metalworker, builder, potter, gardener, wine-maker and so on.

And yet, as we all know, work can so often be a curse as well as a blessing. This being Friday evening I am sure you are all feeling relaxed and happy but I'll wager that come Sunday lunchtime many of you will get that tightening in your stomachs as you begin to anticipate the week ahead. This aspect of work is also reflected in the bible, most notably in Genesis when, after the Fall God says these words to Adam (3:19):

*"By the sweat of your brow  
you will eat your food  
until you return to the ground"*

In other words, while we should certainly see ourselves made in God's image and his co-workers in creation, our work also – inevitably – partakes of the world's fallenness and sin.

This does not, however, mean that work has to be hell, though sadly that is precisely what it seems to be for so many people. I am struck – and deeply saddened – by the number of people I know both personally and professionally who dislike what they do. Now of course, there can be all sorts of reasons for this, some of them beyond their control. But in many cases it's quite hard to conclude anything other than that people are, quite simply, in the wrong job.

The Benedictine monk John Main – a man whose books have taught me so much about prayer and meditation – draws a very useful distinction between "being" and "doing", between who we are and what we do.

*Who* we are is integral to us. We are who we are by virtue of our God-given talents, our passions, energies and innate values. *What* we do is a matter of how we fill our days and for most of us that means work that earns us a living. The vital question here is whether who we are and what we do are in alignment.

To see someone for whom their work is a perfect expression of who they are is truly inspiring – my Vicar is a case in point. Whenever I see this I'm reminded of that famous quotation of the second century theologian Irenaeus of Lyons: *"The glory of God is a human being fully alive"*. But by the same token, when *what* somebody does is out of alignment with *who* they are there is despair and – in a spiritual sense – death. While work may inevitably partake of fallenness it is emphatically not God's will that we should be unhappy in what we do.

How could it be so when Jesus declared that he came that we might *“have life and have it abundantly”* (John 10:10)? There is a real challenge here. For if, as Christians, we find that we are in the wrong job it is our duty to ourselves, to those whom we love and to God to do something about it. Quite simply, we will not fulfil our role as God’s co-workers if we are miserable and unhappy.

Happily of course, many of us are in the right job. It may not be perfect but it’s good enough and we can genuinely thank God for it. So how should our faith guide us in going about this work with all its inevitable difficulties and challenges? What does Christian discipleship actually mean in these circumstances?

I’d like to answer that question by reflecting on five values which are all informed by Jesus’ requirement that we should be the salt of the earth, that what we do and what we say should have a distinctive flavour that is informed by the gospel. By the way, I’m indebted here to Richard Higginson of Ridley Hall for the work that he has led on faith in business and that has provided the framework for my reflections here.

Firstly, truthfulness. It goes without saying that we should be honest in all our dealings at work. Telling lies destroys trust and trust is one of the essential foundations of working life. But for a Christian honesty is about more than not telling lies – it should be a positive virtue, that of telling the truth. In biblical terms this means being “prophetic” – telling the truth of a situation, however uncomfortable that may be. You see Jesus doing this time and again in the New Testament both about individuals and the state of Jewish society as a whole and of course, this ultimately led him to the cross.

In my experience one of the truths that is so often evaded in the workplace is that of poor performance by individuals. Rather than tell the truth managers too often let others shoulder the burden of someone’s poor performance or even promote them to remove the immediate problem.

I realise that it doesn’t reflect very well on me but it was the experience of being ordained and thus becoming a very public Christian that helped me to understand that I had to start telling the truth about such things. While this has directly resulted in some very painful and difficult experiences I have no doubt that telling the truth has been the right thing to do.

Secondly, justice. It goes without saying that we should be fair to people. I could bore you with the myriad ways in which I have to show I'm being fair – fair selection, fair pay, fair appraisals and so on. But the biblical injunction to act justly requires much more than this kind of fairness. For Christians justice involves paying particular attention to the needs of the poor and vulnerable.

I say this realising that this is far easier for those of us in publicly funded organisations than it is for those in the commercial sector. To give an example, at the BBC we've had a two year pay freeze for those at the top of the organisation while giving a flat-rate cash increase to those on the lower pay scales which obviously favours the lowest paid the most. Pleased as I am that we've done this, it would be a much more difficult policy to pursue in a commercial organisation where profitability may depend on holding on to valuable and highly paid staff who may easily be lured elsewhere. And yet in these straitened times it is impossible to read the gospel and not ask ourselves what we should be doing for those at the bottom of the heap.

Thirdly, love, although I realise that the word "love" needs to be used with some care in the workplace. We are all expected to be caring employers these days. We must make sure staff take their holidays, give them feedback and appraisals, attend to their training and development needs and so on. In reality however, much of this gets forgotten in the press of events.

I am fortunate in having an Executive Coach who is a very eminent person in her field. She tells me that repeated surveys show that while many rate their bosses highly for managing them in their tasks they are pretty hopeless at showing any real interest in them as people – their hopes, their desires, their needs and their development which is what they crave above all.

As Christians we are enjoined to love other people and that means seeing them as *whole* people, not just workers employed to fulfil a particular task. This means being available to them, listening to them, supporting them in difficulty, forgiving their mistakes, celebrating their successes and above all encouraging them to develop their talents and abilities.

Fourthly, excellence. A commitment to using our gifts and talents to the full should surely be a key aim of every Christian, conscious as we are of being people made in God's image and sharing with him the work of creation. We should see this commitment as an offering to

God by way of service to others, as well a source of joy and fulfilment for ourselves. I should stress here that this requirement extends to all of us, whatever our station in life. Martin Luther King once memorably put it like this:

*"If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep the streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the Host of Heaven and earth will have pause to say: 'Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well.'"*

But almost in the same breath as stressing the importance of excellence I want to mention my fifth and final value, that of balance. I say this because in our lifetimes expectations of the commitment that people are expected to show to their employers have grown significantly leading to a very unhealthy long hours culture that affects the public sector as well as the private. This is destructive of health and well-being and something that we really should resist as Christians.

It's worth remembering that of the 10 Commandments only one involves a duty to ourselves – and that is the duty of rest. We forget at our peril that in Genesis God rested on the seventh day after his mighty labour of creation. For it is only by rest that we regain perspective, that our energy is recharged and our creativity is renewed.

Quite simply, an effective balance between work and the rest of life is essential to us all if we are to fulfil our true creative potential and not become just dull slaves to mammon. For Christians in the workplace this means modelling this balanced behaviour ourselves and giving permission to those who work for us not to work all hours. This could cost us preferment and promotion, such is the addiction to long hours in some organisations and this may – quite understandably – prove too much for some to stomach. But ultimately the cost of not challenging this insidious development will surely be the greater evil.

So, five discipleship values to live by in the workplace: truthfulness, justice, love, excellence and balance. I don't think the list is exhaustive - I'm sure you can think of others – but as I hope I have shown they are all consistent with the gospel and all have the potential to require a measure of self-sacrifice in the service of others.

Having said that I don't think we can see these as *exclusively* Christian values. I am reminded here of a former colleague and good friend of

mine who pursued her commitment to truthfulness at some cost to herself – putting me to shame in the process - and yet who was (and remains) a convinced atheist. It is rather, I think, that you would – or should – expect to see such values *as more* in evidence amongst Christians.

All of which brings me back to the role of the church in propagating such values, for if the church is committed to building the Kingdom of God, to the doing of God's will here on earth, then surely it should be engaging much more than it is with the workplace? This, I believe, is where the growth in the number of Non-Stipendiary Ministers affords a great opportunity.

The figures tell their own story. There are currently 18,000 or so ordained ministers in the Church of England of whom only just over 8,000 are stipendiary - in other words, paid employees of the church. The remainder comprise 4,500 active retired clergy, 1,500 or so chaplains and 3,300 Non-stipendiary ministers. The key point is that there has been a progressive tipping of the balance *away* from stipendiary clergy over the last 10 years and the burden of paying for them means that their number will continue to decline.

Now not all the 3000 or so non-stipendiary clergy are in secular employment like me but a good number are. The Church of England doesn't keep figures on the numbers of such clergy – a fact which tells its own story – but on my ordination course around half of the 20 or so ordinands were going to continue in either full or part-time secular employment once they were ordained and the number of such clergy is certain to increase.

I have no doubt that if the church were to use this growth in the numbers of working non-stipendiary clergy to engage more effectively with the workplace, it would be greatly appreciated by our congregations. When I preached on this subject at some length in my own church for the first time earlier this year I was taken-aback by the level of response and the evident desire for us to do much more to help people think about their work from the perspective of faith.

A friend of mine, a life-long believer, told me that the church's silence on the workplace only added to his uneasy feeling that it all too often sees its members as existing to nurture and sustain its continued institutional existence, rather than seeing itself as a means of preparing them for their task of witness to a generally unbelieving world.

While it's relatively easy to see how Ministers in Secular Employment could, with sufficient will and support, do more to bring the workplace into the church through sermons, prayers, discussion groups and so on the question of whether there is a role for them *as priests* in the workplace – as distinct from members of the laity observing the kind of gospel values I outlined earlier – is a much more difficult one. I think there is such a role but it involves challenging some deeply held assumptions about what a priest does.

I should define terms here. In one crucial sense we are all of us priests. In Peter's first letter he calls *all* believers "*a chosen people, a royal priesthood*". But priests – or ministers if you prefer – as we generally understand them are, in church terms, "set aside" by members of the church to play a key representative and leadership role. And this role gets expressed in all the ways with which we are most familiar – for instance in celebrating the eucharist and other sacraments, leading in worship and preaching.

Immediately of course one sees the problem for any Minister in Secular Employment trying to conceive of what priestly role he or she might play in the workplace. Now of course there are examples of priests celebrating the eucharist in the workplace, of prayer groups and so forth but they are few and far between, not least because many employers are increasingly uneasy about displays of overt religiosity. In my case the issue simply hasn't arisen. There is no demand for me to perform this kind of function although I would be happy to meet it – if I could – if it arose.

However, to view the priest's role purely in performative terms is to risk confusing form with substance, ritual with witness. For ours is above all an incarnational faith and that must mean that there is a priestly role that can be more fully integrated with the actual business of work itself.

To understand this I think we have to go back to what being a priest actually means, for a priest is a priest not so much by virtue of what he or she does, crucially important though that is, but by virtue of what he or she *is* – we're back at the distinction I referred to earlier between being and doing.

Now, describing what someone *is* in their essence, as opposed to what they *do*, is inherently difficult but a priest should have about them some special quality, unique to them, that will enable them to make

God real for others. John Pritchard, the Bishop of Oxford, puts it like this:

*"Being a priest might be described as kind of loving, a way of deploying the love of God for the well-being of others."*

Now I should stress here that this quality is not possessed by the clergy alone – far from it and I am sure you can all think of Christians who are not clergy and who have about them this special quality. Again, it is a question of the church – in its wisdom – perceiving this quality in some of its members and with it the potential to play an important leadership role. So what might such a role look like in the workplace?

You will recall that in the gospels Jesus constantly refers to the Kingdom of God, a term which summed up his whole purpose. The Kingdom of God exists wherever and whenever God's will is done. Wherever we see the kind of gospel values in action that I talked about earlier – there we see a sign of God's Kingdom.

Our sinful condition is such that in so far as it exists now amongst us it does so incompletely and fleetingly. But crucially, for Christians, these signs of the Kingdom of God are signs of what is to come fully and finally when, at the end of time and in ways that we cannot begin to imagine, God reasserts his rule and brings history to its final conclusion. This, after all, is the great Christian hope of which the Resurrection is both the pointer and the promise.

As Tom Wright points out in his book "Surprised by Hope", this connection between what we do now and what Christians believe will happen in the future means that *anything* we do now to build the Kingdom of God is part of God's overall creative purpose and will not go to waste.

By now I hope the implications of this thinking for the workplace are becoming clear. As I have already observed, for many the workplace is full of dismay and compromise. And yet, it is an essential part of God's good creation and as such deserving of redemption. So for a priest in the workplace the question becomes: what can I do to lead others in bringing about God's kingdom here at work?

In other words, the priest's role is to model the application of the kind of values I talked about earlier. How he or she does this will critically depend on the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. They will therefore need to exercise discernment through observation,

prayer and reflection to identify those aspects of the workplace that are conducive to human health and flourishing and those that impede it. Out of this the priest will then need to develop a vision for their place of work that will focus on what it would look like *if* gospel values were to prevail. Finally, it will be the priest's job to do all he or she can to bring this about – through prayer, through study, through hard work.

Depending on the priest's role in an organisation this exercise of visionary leadership could be for a whole company or for a small unit. My efforts have been focused on creating a team that produces work of the highest standard and in which there are high levels of trust, mutual support and – critically – laughter and enjoyment.

But it's important to remember that realising a vision does not necessarily depend on the exercise of power. One of Ghandi's great dictums was that "*we must be the change we wish to see*". Even – perhaps especially – amongst the powerful, few things are more effective than leadership by example.

What's more, as Wright argues, we shouldn't stint in celebrating evidence of God's work being done by those of other faiths and none. We should gladly join all those who, for whatever reason, seek to bring and enhance life.

In so doing I would single out two things in particular that a priest seeking to exercise his or her ministry in the workplace should do both as ends in themselves and in support of realising their vision. Firstly, prayer.

Former Archbishop Michael Ramsey wrote in his seminal book "*The Christian Priest Today*" that one of the priest's key tasks is "*to be with God, with the people on his heart*". In saying this he explains that the Greek word *entuncanain*, which we habitually translate as "*to intercede*" is more accurately translated as "*to meet*", "*to encounter*", "*to be with*". Put this way, what more priestly activity could there be than engaging with men and women on their terms – not the church's – in their places of work, sharing with them its tensions, contradictions and impossible choices, getting hands dirty with them and for them?

Secondly – and this is obviously related to prayer – there is the listening ministry of being *available* to people, something that, like prayer and study, lies at the heart of any priestly ministry. This can be costly both in terms of time and emotional strain but there can be no doubt as to its value. Michael Ramsey put it like this:

*"...the glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter.....Amidst a vast world with its vast empires and vast events and tragedies our Lord devoted himself to a small country, to small things, to individual men and women, often giving hours of time to the very few or to the one man or woman.....the infinite worth of the one is the key to the Christian understanding of the many."*

As I observed earlier, in today's long-hours, high-pressure work culture the opportunities for genuine engagement like this are rare unless there is a conscious effort to create them. And yet there are few things that would be more widely appreciated and which – particularly against the backdrop of spending cuts and job losses – would speak more eloquently of God's love for the world.

So, in summary, I would argue that there is a distinctive, priestly ministry that can be exercised in the workplace and that it should focus on the development of visionary leadership and be informed both by prayer and availability to others.

This should not mean however, that the clergy should see themselves as exercising leadership *alone*. In fact good leadership is as much about giving up or devolving power and/or responsibility as it is about exercising it. This, after all, is the properly apostolic approach to leadership evident in the Book of Acts and described by St. Paul in terms of the body of Christ. Looked at this way the task for priests or ministers in secular employment is to show their fellow Christians what discipleship in the workplace looks like so that they might exercise leadership more effectively through their own lay ministry.

This lecture has been informed by a strong belief that it is nothing less than essential for the Church to engage with the workplace. As Michael Bourke, a former Bishop of Wolverhampton has argued, we can go one of two ways as we face progressive secularisation. We can either retreat to an institutional model which sees church solely in terms of parishes, congregations and ritual and face decline or we can look outwards and become committed to providing a Christian presence – through both clergy and laity – in all the fragmented communities that constitute the modern world.

The second way will seem fraught with risk and offers no immediate, measurable return. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to say that I thought that, by the exercise of the priestly and lay ministries that I have outlined here, we could bring people into the fellowship of

the church. While this clearly must be our ultimate goal we must accept that the alienation of so many from the church's traditions and liturgies is such that it is not an immediate prospect.

We have, I think, to have an altogether humbler and more realistic ambition and that is to use our experience of the workplace to change the church so that it can discover how to make the gospel appealing to those for whom it presently seems an anachronism. To do this we will need to do precisely what Jesus, the least churchy man imaginable did – namely engage with men and women in their lives and their concerns *on their terms*. And in so doing I would not for a second underestimate the good that we could do in the process if we were so minded.

It is my firm belief that the growth in the number of non-stipendiary ministers in secular employment offers a means of doing precisely this. But if we are to seize this opportunity the Church will need to stop seeing working Non-stipendiary ministers as just an extra pair of hands on a Sunday and start seeing them as priests with a distinctive and important mission all their own that largely takes place outside of the church's precincts.

And my contention is that the sooner it does this then the sooner those who regard the church as an obscure Sunday alternative to DIY or shopping will have reason to pause – and think again. Thank you.

The Revd Mark Wakefield / 2010