



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

DOES OUR WORK DO THE JOB?

In the Genesis creation stories work is seen as a good thing – God put Adam in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. That sounds quite nice! But with Adam's fall comes work as a curse: the ground is unyielding, and work is hard and unrewarding. In that story we see both our ideal and – all too often – the harsher reality of our working lives.

In pre-modern times most of the population were caught up in the endless round of working hard simply in order to survive. In the Bible the Book of Proverbs has several sayings warning of the dangers of laziness:

Go the ant, you lazybones, consider its ways, and be wise.
Without having any chief or officer or ruler,
it prepares its food in summer,
and gathers its sustenance in harvest.
How long will you lie there, O lazybones?
When will you rise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want, like an armed warrior. (*Proverbs 6.6-11*)

But also people recognised how some were obsessed with work or with profit, yet to little purpose:

Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work comes from one person's envy of another ... Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind. Again I saw vanity under the sun: the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. 'For whom am I toiling', they ask, 'and depriving myself of pleasure?' (*Ecclesiastes 4.4-8*)

The *creative* worker in the Bible is God. If we see ourselves as creative in what we do (whether in paid work or elsewhere) we are connecting with God.

Do we live to work or work to live?

The idea that work can be rewarding for its own sake is a fairly modern one. In the time of Jesus the upper classes counted themselves fortunate for not having to work. Freedom and creativity were found through leisure. Work was for the labouring poor and for slaves. Then with the rise of the Church the religious life was what was valued. Priests and monks and nuns often had to work hard like anyone else, in the fields as well as in skilled work, but the life of prayer was The Good Life.

That outlook was challenged by Martin Luther at the beginning of the Reformation in the 1500s. Attacking the institutions of monks and nuns, Luther maintained that everyone's work was equally valid before God. And over the years grew the idea that it should also be interesting and a positive side to our characters.

Of course that is not always the case. There have always been those who have loved their work, and there will always be the jobs which are hard to enjoy. But whether we love or loathe our work, whenever we meet someone new one of the first questions asked is: 'What do you do?' And the answer tells so much. Who we are is bound up with what we do, far more than our hobbies and often more than our families or friends.

If we do not have a paid job we might well claim our work at home (mother, homekeeper, carer...) as our 'occupation'. We insist on the value of what we do and rightly so – but we compare it with a paid job, which speaks volumes! The unemployed often experience a terrifying loss of status as well as the financial sacrifices. And the very wealthy who do not work are not envied as they would have been in earlier days but are looked on with disapproval – doing nothing with their lives! Anyone in that situation has to find some good cause to support, not just for its own sake but also to justify their own existence.

On your death bed, will you look back and wish you spent more time at the office?

Is work taking over our sense of meaning?

When work becomes so central it can become like a cuckoo in the nest, pushing out all the other ways in which we see ourselves as human beings, loved and valued. And if our job is not rewarding, or we do not have a job, we might feel further diminished. Or we enjoy our work and end up neglecting the other aspects of our lives, and neglecting family and friends.

‘A new form of elitism has emerged in the labour market: work as vocation and work as pleasure. In a society that places a high premium on self-expression and fulfilment, to have a lot of interesting work is a status symbol. It’s not just that you have a job that pays decently; you have a job which is so satisfying and fulfilling that you don’t want to stop working.’

Some firms push a particular culture by slogans and mission statements – and some employees get meaning from them. "I see my values as aligned with Orange values," says one Orange manager. "I don't hold myself up to being a saint, but I try to incorporate the brand values into everything I do." (Is he talking about Orange or about God?)

(Madeleine Bunting, *Willing Slaves*)

Ask yourself:

If you won the Lottery tomorrow, would you give up work?

What work would you really like to do? Or would you opt for a life of leisure?

What else in your life matters to you and gives you a sense of purpose and belonging?

Does your faith open up new avenues, or does it prevent you doing certain jobs?

Giving to others; receiving for ourselves

Our work makes best sense not just when we enjoy it or are well paid, but also when we see the good it does. We need to *believe* in our work.

'When does a job seem meaningful? Whenever it allows us to generate delight or reduce suffering in others. Though we are often taught to think of ourselves as inherently selfish, the longing to act meaningfully in our work seems just as stubborn a part of our make-up as our appetite for status or money. It is because we are meaning-focused animals rather than simply materialistic ones that we can reasonably contemplate surrendering security for a career to bring drinking water to rural Malawi or might quit a job in consumer goods for one in cardiac nursing...

But we should be wary of restricting the idea of meaningful work too tightly, of focusing only on the doctors, the nurses, the nuns or the Old Masters. There can be less exalted ways to contribute to the furtherance of the collective good. The real issue is not whether baking biscuits is meaningful, but the extent to which the activity can seem to be so after it has been continuously stretched and subdivided across five thousand lives and half a dozen different manufacturing sites. And endeavour endowed with meaning may appear meaningful only when it proceeds briskly in the hands of a restricted number of actors and therefore where particular workers can make an imaginative connection between what they have done with their working days and their impact upon others.' (Alain de Botton: *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*)

Whatever we do in our lives, we need to feel rewarded, and we need to feel that we are contributing to the good of others. Both sides have to be in balance. If we are not sufficiently rewarded we feel exploited. If the reward appears disproportionately large others – and we ourselves – accuse us of greed. If we do not see the good we do for others the job becomes empty and meaningless. (These things are not always straight forward. In dull work sometimes the human relationships might be our reward and give us meaning instead.)

Back to Genesis: in the creation stories God saw that what he made was good. Do you have the same satisfaction in something that you do?

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