

SERMON FOR TRINITY 15 | 24.09.17 at 8am

When someone throws into a conversation, ‘do we live to work or work to live?’, it usually means that they think they are working too much! That somehow, whether by choice or not, the work/life balance has got out of kilter.

And then there’s the other standard question, on first meeting someone new ‘So what do you do? What is your job?’ – an especially difficult question for the unemployed, or for the retired – and one that begs the question ‘Am I just what I do?’ Would it be a different kind of person if I did, or had done, another job? Has my job shaped and changed me? Would I be happier if I had done something else?

With everyone working longer hours, but having more (and often more exotic) holidays, where those who are beginning work now will expect to change jobs far more often than previous generations did, where the flexibility that technology provides of being able to work at least some of our time from home, and where longer paternity leave means that career breaks are open to both genders in ways not imagined before – all these things suggest that our paid occupations require us think more than ever about the nature of work.

To help we have this little story from the book of Jonah. As you will remember, Jonah has been commissioned by God to leave the familiar comforts of home and to make the perilous journey to Nineveh, the ‘big city’. And his task was to get the people to repent.

But it is quite clear that while Jonah knows what his job is, he actually wants a different outcome; he rather hopes he will fail. He wanted to see what would happen when the full anger of God came upon the people of ‘sin city’. And when he doesn’t get what he wanted, he sulks. Big time. *O Lord, please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live.* Talk about over-acting!

The issue for us, of course, is about integrity and integrity at work. What happens when we don’t like the direction that our managers are taking? What do we do when we feel our own opinions or beliefs are being side-lined? Not many of us can afford to give up our jobs because we disagree with those in charge. We need to eat and we need to have a roof over our heads. It may be OK for football managers but for the likes of you and me, it isn’t that easy.

Even in the Church. I could share with you at least three instances when I seriously considered resigning from the Church of England.

But I didn't. Why? A lack of courage - or something else?

As the story of Jonah unfolds we see God taking his recalcitrant member of staff in hand. And so we get the story of the bush which grew overnight to protect the sulking Jonah as he sat out in the midday sun. God has something to teach Jonah and in the conversation we hear how the bush is there one day – and gone the next. Happy to have the bush there, Jonah goes back to sulking when the plant that gave him shelter, suddenly dies.

In this dialogue God first has to teach Jonah the value of life – in this case the 120,000 people of Nineveh. But how does God teach Jonah? With a lesson? No, for Jonah needs to experience with his whole being the lesson that God has in mind. And so we see Jonah go from being a hugely effective communicator, someone well able to get the people of Nineveh to repent – right down to the poor wimp on the street, wailing on because a small plant has got a worm and he has been forced to sit in the sun without any shade.

What comes across to me so strongly is the part that Jonah's workplace plays in his education. In fact it is there where he discovers what kind of person he really is: part valuable bureaucrat, part coward – and at the end, part child.

Like Jonah, to run away from the challenges of my job would ultimately take me away from the purpose of my life: to face each and every day knowing that in this day I have things which God wants to teach me. I may complain or even try to run away: yet God has me in the palm of his hand and my work - whatever it is – is one of the most valuable places where I learn from him.

The Gospel takes us in a slightly different direction. Here the argument is apparently about fairness. Is it right to pay the same wage to those who have labored through the heat of the day and to those who have come in for just the last hour?

Natural justice would say that the day-long workers were due at least an additional bonus. Which would take us into the whole area of benefits and rewards. And a long way away from the setting of the story.

Which is about the needs of these workers. Each has similar requirements – a family to feed, a home to maintain. The fact that some were not needed to work until a later shift does not alter their circumstances. If the needs are fixed but the work is not available, what do those under-employed people do?

What do I say on the doorstep as I hear each day the appeals of those who are subject to the current round of benefit cuts? These people are not defined by the jobs they do but by the fact that they are not working. We define them, as a society, in a very different way. The term ‘job seekers allowance’ tells everything about the relationship of that person to our society. It is our grudging hand-out to those who we feel should be working.

Jesus’ parable suggests to me that if God is the landowner as Jesus seems to imply, then his attitude to the workers is based - not on the amount of work in the vineyard that these men have or haven’t done - but on a different emotion altogether.

In a short episode from the TV fly on the wall documentary ‘Educating Greater Manchester’, a child whose behavior over many weeks has been more than challenging, is sitting in front of the Head Teacher. Everything would suggest that this child is a waste of space and is never going to *achieve* anything worthwhile.

In the conversation, she is being given yet another chance to get her life sorted and to start preparing for her GCSE examinations. And you can see her mind ticking over until she is forced to ask Mr Povey: *why do you still bother with me?*

And without any hesitation he answers *Because I care too much.* Mr Povey knows he will only grow/be happy if his work is about putting himself second for the people he has been sent to serve in his school.

As our biblical stories reveal, the value of work is only partly about what is achieved. Its greatest value is how much we learn to care for the people we meet along the way.