

## **Harvest Thanksgiving ~ Work Sunday 2011**

### **– joining the dots**

Genesis 1 & 2 (1:27 f.f.); Genesis 3:14-19; Luke 12:16-21

At one point in my life I spent some years working as a Metal Worker's Assistant at a steel fabricating plant in Gracefield in the Hutt Valley – a misnomer for a place-name if ever there was one. At the time, this was the lowest paid award wage in the country– even lower than the Cleaner's Award (which, with no minimum wage, was pretty low). But what was lacking in remuneration was made up for in interest – in a perverse kind of way.

The Boiler Makers Union, of which I became a member, was probably despised only slightly less than the Cooks and Stewards Union at the time. These gentlemen held the inter-island ferries to ransom with, what seemed at times to be, almost weekly strikes over one petty thing or another, thereby cheesing off the public enormously. These industries were full of tough men who had grown up in the slums of Britain and Scotland, worked in the dock yards of Tyneside and on oil rigs in the North Sea and Gulf. Life had not dealt them an easy hand and they knew that, in the end, regardless of how others saw them, they only had each other. Striking, then, was not just about money and conditions, it was a way of asserting solidarity, self worth and identity by sticking it to the boss – and everybody else.

About that time I happened to be dating a girl from across the tracks and so found myself attending dinner parties in Khandallah and the better addresses in Wadestown and Karori. Flashed up and well scrubbed each Friday and Saturday, I did my best to blend in – despised flotsam during the week; socialite on the weekends.

The problem was, though, that nearly every conversation at these posh events went the same way: “Oh, and what do *you* do?” “I'm a boiler maker's

assistant”. “Really?! How *interesting*”, at which point they would move away. At one party, I became so fed up with this routine that when the inevitable question came, I said I worked for an escort agency. This so infuriated my girlfriend that that she walked out. At least the other woman didn’t...

If nothing else, though, I learnt through these experiences, that we live in a society where people define themselves – their self worth, their humanity – by their work. Moreover, they judge others by their occupations as well.

Interestingly, the bible opens its grand narrative by dealing with just this issue...

In today’s reading from the book of Genesis, we learn that human beings (male and female) are created in God’s image and part of what this means is that we are given responsibility to unfold God’s creation – a creation which is rich and productive, full of every good thing, and pregnant with all sorts of possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

In the story God gives Adam authority to develop creation’s potential in order create a fulfilling life. The self awareness involved in the naming of the creatures, the use of language, is part of exercising this God-like authority, part of this image bearing, as was the caring for the garden. Later Eve makes an appearance and joins Adam in this activity.

*Work*, then, was an integral part of what it meant to be made in God’s image. Being human, means sharing in God’s creative activity in the world. This opening up of all that God gives us, is the business of human beings: in the beginning this was seen as ‘good’, not in a moral sense, but in that everything related to everything else as it should – there was a ‘right order’, a ‘rightness’ about everything – including work.

But unlike God, human work is subject to certain boundaries. Firstly, while

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<sup>1</sup> Gen.2:9,15,19-20.

work is seen as part of what it means to be human, it isn't pictured as *everything*. In our Genesis reading we are also told that God chose to rest on the seventh day after his work of creation and that this also was a good thing. Later, when Moses is given God's commandments for living, God's people are told they too should rest and that this was what essentially defined the Sabbath as holy – it was set apart for rest.<sup>2</sup>

So then, there are restrictions around human work. As we care for and develop the world about us, humans are not given license to just do as we please: '*dominion*' does not mean '*domination*'. '*Dominion*' may infer kingship but, as we later see in Christ, it is *servant kingship* which God requires.

Moreover, humans are to remember we are creatures: yes we do *bear* God's image and part of this involves God's rule over creation, but we are not to behave *as* God. Rather, our work is to proceed in *dependence upon* and *obedience to* God. There are some fruit that we shouldn't consume or we die – an "Inconvenient Truth" that we still find hard to accept even when the cumulative results of "eating" everything are catastrophic.

There *are* limits and we need to recognise these: we are not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for to try and act as God is not just to overreach ourselves, and so invite dysfunction into our enterprise, but to elevate our role as co-workers with God to *idolatrous* proportions.

With God made redundant, work becomes everything; or as Paul later rewrote this idea in his letter to the Christians in Rome: "Thinking themselves to be wise, they became fools... they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped the creation rather than the creator..". Paraphrasing Paul we could say: "Human beings, thinking themselves to be equal to God chose to relate to the creation in a different way – to live without God." Part of human

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<sup>2</sup> Ex.20:8.

beings turning away from God is that we see things falsely even while we think we see things clearly. We think we can order our lives independently, including and especially our work lives, even while we find we can't.

The second part of our reading from Genesis outlines the consequences of this.

'Work' was always work. It wasn't rest. It was hard but rewarding. But as a result of our behaving as if we were God, we have both brought destruction upon the earth and, to borrow from Marx, become '*alienated*' from our work. The very tree we sought to grasp has turned to gorse in our hand. Work has become toil, even while it has become addictive toil. Naming and caring has become controlling and exploiting, subduing the earth has become destroying it. Unfolding the potential of creation has become a greedy rush for wealth that destroys the very source of our sustenance. Work is somehow objectified as we make it the defining benchmark of who we are and by which we presume to judge others.

The results of this are not good...

When work becomes everything, family and community life are put under tremendous pressure. Our economy, for instance, depends on most parents working. Parents are exhausted from working in the "lean mean economy" that often demands long hours and work being brought home if not done late at the office. People are incredibly busy to the point where just being with friends has to be something we plan weeks if not months in advance.

Voluntary organisations struggle to find people who have the energy to give of their talents and so the wider community is impoverished.

Even the things we say we work *for* are devalued. You may recall a few years ago the bitter objections to the modest maternity leave provisions the then government introduced. Ironically, it was argued, we can't afford people to have children, we need to be more productive!

When we do have children it doesn't get a lot better. 'Latch-key kids' are the norm throughout our nation as parents work to pay off the holiday they VISA'd or the latest consumable from NewBolds they thought would add to their "family life".

Couples caught up in working all hours and entertaining in the rest see less and less of each other. Marriages struggle to stay fresh as they are stifled.

I think we all feel caught up to some degree in this craziness – a craziness we can see is crazy even while we literally work to perpetuate it. Our Gospel reading today points to both the arrogance and folly of it all. We have our "life plans" and ambitions, we store up excess treasure over our needs, we work as if we shall live forever. Yet in the end, as with the man in Jesus' story, our lives are required of us. "And the things you have worked for, whose will they be?" asks Jesus. "So it is with those who store up wealth for themselves but who are not rich toward God".

What is the way forward for us then, in a society that seems so skewed in its attitude to work?

In Paul's letter to the Ephesian Christians he writes:

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free... And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and*

*with him there is no partiality.*<sup>3</sup>

This admonition to slaves and masters comes just after similar ones to husbands and wives, and children and parents. On the face of it, the passage could be read as an endorsement of the protestant work ethic if not of the economic and social institution of slavery. But it's worth remembering that when Tychicus carried this letter to Ephesus (a letter which he and Timothy probably helped Paul write during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome), he also carried a letter to Philemon at nearby Colossi. In that letter Paul put forward the very subversive argument that it was Philemon's duty as a brother in Christ, to free the run-away slave, Onesimus; a duty he should perform voluntarily and with love since both Paul the prisoner, and Philemon the master, found their freedom *in Christ*.

So in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is on about something else when he urges slaves to work hard and masters to stop threatening their slaves. He is not concerned with the issue of slavery as such. He is getting at something far deeper.

Paul is arguing that each should stop exploiting the other and do their work ungrudgingly as "slaves of *Christ*" for their heavenly master. In so saying, he is arguing that part of the redemptive work of God's new family, the church, is to model a *re-ordering* of life; a life centred around Jesus with work taking its proper place as *service* to God through service to each other – those "over" us and those "under".

Paul talks about work in terms of "obeying Christ", the one who came to serve. And he emphasises rendering this service with enthusiasm, not because it is the be-all-and-end-all of every thing, not because it is work that defines who we are, nor because work is somehow 'good for us' in some moral sense, nor because it assigns one person honour and causes another to be looked down

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<sup>3</sup> Eph.6:5-9.

upon or exploited; but rather, work as service, work as bounded duty, becomes joyful and is undertaken with enthusiasm because, when done unto “God from the heart”, brings things back into proper relationship, back into the original ‘right’ order of creation, it re-assigns to us our image bearing responsibility and so re-unites as God’s co-workers in God’s garden.

This week we have just had a budget. This is election year. Thinking biblically about public policy and its impacts upon the creation, how we work within that creation and the outcomes all this has upon each other, our families – the families of the world – is important. It is our task to wrestle with these issues. The real work is the hard work of joining the dots...