

## Our vocation – slaves of Christ

Psalm 127; Ephesians 6:5-9; Luke 8:19-21

I love the psalm we heard today. It speaks of a rightly ordered life, a life of right priorities (something I really need and long for), where work has its place, not of dominance (when it becomes “anxious toil”<sup>1</sup> that distorts all else), but as something which serves to build<sup>2</sup> God’s *shalom* – the life of abundance of which the evangelist John speaks in his Gospel.<sup>3</sup>

As a new granddad, I especially connect with the psalmist’s connection of God’s *shalom* with *whanau*. Children are indeed a blessing. As the psalmist notes, how “vain” and wrong it is that we are often too busy to notice or experience this in our lives.

Last week we looked at excerpts from the opening chapters of the book of Genesis as I spoke in general terms about work and the place it occupies in our life. We looked at work as:

- Something which we do as humans made in the image of God – as Jesus is the *servant* king, so we are called to exercise such a role within the creation, and this is our *worship*.
- Something we are given to do to continue God’s re-creative, *redeeming*, work within the creation.
- Something which, though important, is to be kept in *balance* with the rest of our lives – especially our need as humans for *rest*.
- I also noted how work, like all else, has become very skewed in how we see it and undertake it, and what we expect of it.

Given these very general, albeit very abstract principles, I finished the sermon with three challenges which arise from contemporary living where work has for many taken on idolatrous proportions, providing not just the means for living but our very identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Ps.127:3.

<sup>2</sup> V.1.

<sup>3</sup> Jn.10:10.

Against this background, it seems to me the genesis story doesn't just beg some questions but *demand*s some *answers* of us as God's people:

- What place does work have in our lives? Do we need to repent – individually and as God's people – of how we work?
- Do we *really* understand our work as part of God's redemptive activity in the world?
- How do we see our work as part of our call to God's worship and service? What could this look like?

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I don't know if you noticed but for the last couple of weeks a road gang has been ripping up the road outside our church? I think this is part of the Council's new 'Dig up the road plan for congesting traffic scheme'.<sup>4</sup>

There's been some terrible weather the last couple of weeks, high winds and torrential rain interspersed by sunny days with icy breezes. Looking at those guys really going for it, I couldn't help but think of my own years as a labourer – particularly one stint I did helping coat and lay a pipeline from Totara Park ("not just a place but a way of life"), to Silverstream.

Many days I finished so covered dirt and tar it took me well over an hour to clean up every night (sometimes having to wash myself with a solvent called Xylol to do it). It was tough hard work by tough hard men. I learnt a lot from these men about how the "other half" lived and experienced the world. Yet, though we toiled, I wonder if this was the same as the toil of which the Psalmist wrote?

Regardless, this week I have been reminded, that for most, work is work. It's one thing for someone who loves their work (paid or un-paid), to see it as something that is offered to God as their worship and service and, as extension of that, to look for ways to use their work as part of God's "re-creative and redeeming work within the creation".

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<sup>4</sup> Spike Milligan, *The Goon Show – Scarlet Capsule's*, BBC, 1959.

For many, however, work hardly approaches such high minded ideals. Both Marx and the writer of Genesis were right: for the most part we are deeply alienated from our work just as we are alienated from ourselves and each other.

... Mulling all this over, I've been pondering slavery as perhaps the most extreme example of this. The bible is full of references to slaves and a surface reading at least paints an ambiguous picture of slavery.

Our Gospel reading certainly makes it clear, though, that people of Jesus' time understood perfectly the arduous and even thankless life of the slave. There's a lot of talk in the literature about the slave's place in the extended household and how they were seen as part of the family and so on. Similar talk was often heard in defence of slavery before abolition. Such an argument is crazy of course – after all, if slaves enjoyed their lives so much my bond them? Why not just let them go free and they would stay anyway? More than that, though, trying to defend slavery, (as with any oppressive work relationship, for that matter), simply isn't tenable. The fact is, slavery was harsh. The punishment for a runaway slave from a Roman household was death. The slave had no rights. Work for the slave was one of *duty*.

Given that extremes throw issues into sharp relief, I especially pondered this week the section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which we spent some time on last year, and how this relates to work.

Towards the end of his letter<sup>5</sup> Paul turns from general principles concerning the household of God to look at how these principles might apply in concrete social relations of his time. Speaking of relations between men and women, and children and their parents he says,

“Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul is taking the same principles of *sacrifice* and *service* that are found in Christ and saying these principles are to be let lose in the context of the Christian family – be it Jewish or Greek in origin. And when this is done *transformation* ensues.

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<sup>5</sup> Eph.5:21-6:9.

<sup>6</sup> Eph.5:21.

Similarly, he goes on, slaves are not to see their new found liberty in Christ as a licence for anarchy, just as masters are to see themselves as “having the same master in heaven”, and so “will receive the same again from the Lord, whether slave or free”.<sup>7</sup>

These are difficult words for us but in his context this was radical stuff indeed, as Philemon was later to discover when Paul wrote to him to treat his run-away slave Onesimus, not as a possession returned to him, but as a brother in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, again, even in this case, Paul didn't lay down a rule as to how slaves in general were to be treated or that slavery should be abolished. Neither, on the other hand, did he argue that the work and lot of a slave was a good and noble thing ordained by God. Rather he let loose an *irresistible dynamic* that would topple *all* forms oppression and alienation, even the domination of empire of which slavery was an integral part.

This yeast worked its work against the odds, even when in centuries to come oppressors, through their justification of slavery as ordained of God in scripture, sought to hijack for their own ends this very principle Paul is here enunciating.

Be that as it may, it remains that Paul is here calling us to an ethic around work, both within and beyond the household of God, that is exactly the opposite – an ethic of liberation into meaning and fulfilment even for the slave and their master.

This “work ethic” (if you like), is perhaps best summarised in the words of Prof. Edwin Judge who, typically, gathers together these many threads in Paul's letter so well:

“The mystery of *sacrifice* and *service*, therefore, which Paul perceived in the cross, leads him to his fundamental position on all questions of social relations... which is the complete surrender of one's own interest for the sake of the

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<sup>7</sup> Eph.6:8.

<sup>8</sup> Phil.15-16.

other. There could be no more radical approach to the problems of status and order in society than this”.<sup>9</sup>

The point is this. Work is *work*. It is important to take our work seriously, no matter what it is, but it is also important to remain mindful that work does not *define* us, even if it is at the core of our calling in Christ.

As Paul forcefully argues, we are called to be “slaves of Christ, *doing* the will of God from our heart. [To] serve wholeheartedly, as if we are serving the Lord...”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Edwin Judge, *St Paul as a Radical Critic of Society*, in *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century, Pivotal Essays by E.A. Judge*, ed., David M Scholer, Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts, 2008. P.115. Italics mine, not Judge’s.

<sup>10</sup> Eph.6:6-7 adapted.