

# Redeeming Work

Genesis 1-3<sup>1</sup> ; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 22:24-27

I want to say just a few things today about work and the place it occupies in our lives. In the first instance I want to offer a series of simple observations arising from our (quite lengthy) scripture readings and which are relevant to our theme. Then I want to ask just a few questions against the backdrop of our contemporary context – a context where we tend to define ourselves in terms of our work, where, in some quarters, there is an almost obsessive attitude bordering on an idolatry of work and where, conversely, if we don't have paid work we are told we don't count.

[c.f. ageism; the unemployed; parenting]

People have very polarised attitudes about work. On the one hand it is held out as almost a moral good. I can recall the huge shift in attitudes towards work that occurred in the 80s where there became something almost noble about working minimum 60 hour weeks – anything less implied you were not really important enough to be in demand.

On the other hand, I recall in my teens my father saying to me, “one day you find that if you're any good at something you will have to choose between that and your family. I hope you make the right choice”.

[c.f. my own kids looking back]

Well, to our readings...

## 1. **Humans created in God's image to exercise “*dominion*”**

[re-read from genesis 1:26]

Firstly, our reading from the Genesis story tells us that God made human beings to reflect who God is – in particular, to exercise responsible “*authority*”<sup>2</sup> over the creation.

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<sup>1</sup> See readings at the end of this sermon.

<sup>2</sup> ‘*dominion*’

The idea of humans being made in God's image is probably borrowed from Egyptian understandings of "kingship".<sup>3</sup> Like most of the surrounding mythologies of the time, Egyptian stories of creation served as ideologies to bolster the authority of those in power. The Pharaoh was seen as being in the image of God". And to be like God is to be in charge.

Here in the Hebrew story, this "kingship", this "authority", is radically 'democratised' as it is extended to *all* of humanity. We are *all* given this *responsibility* to rule.

A lot of people have issues with this idea of humans having "authority" (even if we recognise it as a responsibility), blaming it for creating a mind-set which sees humans as over and against the rest of the creation rather than working within it.<sup>4</sup> Our reading from Colossians certainly emphasises the *cosmic scope* not just of Christ's *redemption*, but his "kingship" or "lordship" as well. All was created by God through Christ, Christ has redeemed all things and everything belongs to him. As those baptised into Christ, we share this with him.

It was, perhaps, in catching a glimmer of this in Jesus, that the first disciples were tempted into squabbling as to who was going to get what in this new kingdom of which Jesus spoke.

Yet, for those who would follow him, this "kingship" of Christ – a "status" in which we share – is ultimately understood in terms of *servanthood* – our Lord Jesus "came as one who serves", *not* to exploit and dominate, and his Kingdom – his rule and authority – is to reflect this.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Humans given work to do

The second thing we notice around our theme from the Genesis story, is that God gave human beings something to do – he gave them

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 1-11 Word Biblical Commentary*, Word, 1987. p.30.

<sup>4</sup> White, Lynn. 1974. "The historical roots of our ecologic crisis [with discussion of St Francis; reprint, 1967]," *Ecology and religion in history*, (New York :Harper and Row, 1974); reprinted <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:27.

*work*. Again, this work *we* are given is an image or reflection of *God's* creative work.

God creates the earth and whilst it is finished and is “*good*”, it is at the same time *open*, in that it is full of *possibilities*. Humans are given a task to do and that is to look after the earth, to unfold and develop all its potential. The man names all the creatures and so gives *shape* to the garden – he continues God’s work of making order. In other words, human beings create a ‘*culture*’ from the gift of the creation.

As we see later in the book of Genesis, this is an on-going task – albeit one with tragic outcomes when we attempt this without God. Yet *we*, *the reborn* humanity in Christ, children of the second Adam (as Paul calls us<sup>6</sup>), are now called to continue God’s work in Christ of re-ordering and re-creating – of *redeeming* – the creation and our culture which arises in response to it.

This work of opening up of all that God gives us is at the core of what it means to be human and especially what it means to be disciples of Jesus.

In the beginning this activity was seen, like the rest of creation, as “*good*” – that is, just as everything related to everything else as it should, just as there was a “*rightness*” about everything thing, so too work was part of this right order. Work was to be done in proper relation to everything else.

This right ordering means there are limits beyond which humans are told not to go. The work of unfolding creation’s potential is to be done under God – that is, in response to God’s command.

(By the way – talking of commandments, notice how no ‘religion’ is mentioned in the Genesis story. Human worship was to live and to work before God in humble *service* and *obedience*. *This* was their worship – their offering. Paul ( as a good Jew), picks this up in Romans 12:1-2, where the whole of our life given over to God is seen

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 15:42-49 c.f. Rom.8:20-21.

as our true “spiritual worship”. Notice how this then clarifies how we see the world – allows us to see clearly what God requires of us.)

Anyway, coming back to this idea of limits around our work of developing the potential of creation...

### 3. **Work and Rest**

One of these limits is ‘rest’. God rested from his work of creating “on the seventh day”. This rest was also seen as part of the “good” order of things.

Later, when God gave law to Moses to govern how the people of God should live, he said:<sup>7</sup>

‘Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart.<sup>8</sup>

So the same pattern of work and rest that was established at the beginning of things is seen to be part of how humans – made in the image of God – are also to live. There is a place for work and there is a place for rest – for leisure. Work is important but it is not everything. It is a *means* of honouring God, but it is not an end in itself.

Meantime, back in the garden...

### 4. **Humans become alienated from their work**

Human beings, thinking themselves to be wise and equal with God chose to relate to the creation in a different way – to do it without God. Part of human beings turning away from God is that we see

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 20:8-11.

<sup>8</sup> ‘consecrated’

things falsely even while we think we see things clearly. Instead of choosing the way life, we choose death.

And so human's become separated from God and God's ways... As part of this humans become alienated from their work – work becomes pointless, it becomes *toil* – hard work getting us nowhere. This is the curse of humankind.

### **The background against which we read this story**

Against this background stand the lies of our time – not much different from the lies that Adam and Eve bought into in our story.

- Instead of serving, we have come to dominate not just the earth (c.f Lynn White et al), but each other.
- Instead of our work being part of God's on-going redemptive and re-creative activity in the creation – of Christ's calling of the creation back to what it was created to be – we contribute instead to the woes of our existence, creating poverty for the many, wealth for the few, and a degraded (increasingly unsustainable) environment.
- Instead of a healthy work / life balance, we give a huge amount of time to work and the supposed satisfactions it provides.
- Instead of work being a means of offering thanks and praise to God for our lives and the gift of creation – full and meaningful and pregnant with possibility – we orientate everything in our lives – our family, our friendships, our relationship with the creation itself and even our worship – around work and its children – wealth and status. Such is our modern idolatry.

### **Some questions demanding an answer**

Against this background, it seems to me our text today 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, as God's people – of how we work?

- To what extent do we see 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?

***Our Old Testament reading is taken from the book of Genesis, with excerpts from chapters, 1, 2 and 3... you find these on page 8 of your pew bible...***

***verse 26...***

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created human kind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

***chapter 2, verse 8...***

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of

trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And a river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters...

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man.”

### ***Chapter 3, verse 1...***

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

The man said, “The woman you put here with me--she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

So the LORD God said... to the man...

“Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

***Hear what the spirit is saying to the church!***

***Our New Testament reading is from Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, verses 15-20...***

**(This can be found on page 1147 of your pew bibles)**

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

***Hear what the spirit is saying to the church!***

***The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 22, verses 24-27... This can be found on page 1023 of your pew bibles.***

Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them,

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that.

Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table?

But I am among you as one who serves.”

***This is the Gospel of Christ!***