

Our New Testament reading (2 Corinthians 6. 1-13) has been described as a 'Charter for Christian service' or work. The first words of this chapter of Paul's letter are: "As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain". From time to time, people ask what is the church's direction about work in general, particularly such as now when there have been strikes by Northern railway workers. The answer is that the Church does not have a doctrine of work, though the bible has quite a lot to say on the subject. So it is up to each one of us to relate the bible's teaching in practice.

Professor William Barclay, in his excellent and easily readable book on Ethics, quotes two contrary thoughts about work which can be echoed by many of us: showing that work is either a curse or a blessing. A dying charwoman, who saw it as a curse, wrote this poem about the next life:

"Don't pity me now
Don't pity me never
I'm going to do nutting
For ever and ever!"

But Rudyard Kipling's dream of what he wanted when life ended shows work in a different light. Portraying the work of an artist after death, he writes:

"They shall work for an age at a sitting,
and never grow tired at all.
And only The Master shall praise us,
and only The Master shall blame;
And no one shall work for money,
and no one shall work for fame,
But each for the joy of working,
and each in his separate star,
shall draw the Thing as he sees it
for the God of Things as they are."

In the charwoman's quotation, the end of this life is the end of work - thank God! In the one by Kipling, the end of life is the opportunity to work as never before - and praise God!

Of course, it is not quite as simple as that in this world. We cannot polarise work into black versus white. People go on strike for shorter working hours and yet the same men and women think nothing of spending long hours slogging hard in their own garden. But ask them to accept a gardener's job and pay full-time and they understandably refuse. With exceptions, by and large it is not work itself to which people object. It is the necessity to work to which they object, and too the necessity to do work that they do not enjoy. There is a marvellous chapter 3 in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes which is well worth reading. It starts: "For everything there is a season ... a time to be born and a time to die ... a time to work", and so on. At the end, the Preacher says: "there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work". As I have!

Some assume that because we think a job is dull or boring, no-one else can enjoy it. But that is not true. Soon after ordination, I spent a period training as an Industrial Chaplain, visiting factories talking to the workers. One place at Slough was a bottling plant for “4711” perfume. (I remember it well for the lovely smells!) One lady there spent the whole of her working life putting caps on perfume bottles. Assuming that she found the work dull and uninspiring I asked: ‘wouldn’t she like to change to another machine from time to time’. “Oh no” she replied: “Every cap has to be inspected. Quite a number are defective and have to be rejected. Mine is an essential job to maintain the quality of the perfume and I enjoy it”. When I questioned men working on nearby machine pressing jobs, they said much the same thing. Only those who could not find satisfaction in their work, found it boring. So we should not assume that everyone has the same opinion of work.

The teaching of Jesus has certain implications relative to industrial unrest over pay. In the ‘Parable of the labourers in the vineyard’, the owner of the vineyard agreed to employ men at a certain rate a day. At different times throughout the day, he employed more men. At the end of the day, he paid them all at the same rate. The men who had worked longest, grumbled; and said that they ought to get more than the others. But Jesus makes the vineyard owner say: “Stop grumbling. You have received a fair wage, to which you agreed before you started. You were quite satisfied this morning. If you have enough money, why envy others because of my generosity to them”. This parable implies four Christian rights. One, the right of a person to work, if they wish. Two, the right of a person to a living wage, if they are willing to work. Three, the right to reasonable working conditions. Fourth, the right of an employer to employ whom he chooses, provided no one is victimised.

It was my sad experience to be working in the Yorkshire coal mining area during the vicious miners’ strikes of the early 1970s. Although some were underpaid, the majority of miners were very well paid, especially with their free coal and other perks, so not everyone wanted to go on strike. It was horrifying to see miner fighting miner, even in the same family; office girls spat upon, men savagely kicked, houses of former colleagues set on fire. Nowhere in the bible is there anything to suggest that it is ever right and proper for strike pickets to intimidate other people who wish to work, or actually prevent them from working. This applies even if the intimidation is peaceful. The excuse for such actions is often that ‘a principle’ is involved. It will be a sad day for Christianity and for the world, when principles become more important than people. Jesus did not live and die for principles; he lived and died for people.

Though personally: I consider the enormous sums that a few company Chairmen award themselves, positively indecent: especially when at the same time this means they lay off employees to ‘save costs’. If a man starts a private business and he becomes a millionaire, there is nothing unchristian about that. But when a Public Board Chairman’s salary is nearly doubled in one year, this is

seriously unethical, especially when the cost to the consumer is increased to pay for it.

This is not the time to consider the many other biblical passages relevant to aspects of work; about which Jesus and Paul in particular have much to teach us. But let me leave you with this thought. When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, he was invited to take worldly possessions that he had not earned. Jesus resisted that temptation. This is a good example for us all to follow in our work: whether we are working for money or for pleasure in our leisure time. The same applies to sports men and women who secretly try to unfairly increase their performance with drugs.