

Sermon Given by

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At the 10:30am and 6pm Services on 6th June 2010

“Back to the beginning”

We're starting as has been mentioned a short series on the topic of work today and I may as well say it right at the start, because I'm sure some people are thinking it: yes indeed, how dare a clergyman stand up and speak about work. Everyone knows that most clergymen have never done an honest day's work in their lives. There's that saying that ministers are 'six days invisible and one day incomprehensible'. I heard a story about a vicar who liked fox-hunting. So he deliberately gave his horse an unconventional name. He called the animal: Parish Business. That meant that his wife could honestly say whenever anyone came looking for him: 'I'm so sorry – he's out on Parish Business...' Well you will be pleased to hear that I don't intend to speak on the basis of my own experience of work. We are setting ourselves the aim of seeing some of what the Bible has to say on the topic. Inevitably there is a lot of material we could look at. If you consider that work occupies a very significant place in people's lives, it is no surprise that the Bible has so much to say about it.

And it is essential that we must learn how to think Christianly about it. The average worker still divides his or her day up into three more or less equal periods – 8 hours sleep, 8 hours work and 8 hours leisure. So our work occupies a third of our day, indeed a half of our waking hours. It stands to reason therefore: we must get the Bible's perspective on it, or the word of God can hardly be said to be influencing our lives as it should.

As in so many matters of Christian living and behaviour, the proper starting point is to go back to the beginning and the early chapters of the first book of the Bible. We're going to focus today on Genesis chapters 1-3 and I have two main points:

First: Don't despise work – it is part of God's created world order

We may well be familiar with the first four words of the Bible: In the beginning, God. But you could actually add one more word and it would be a fair summary of the opening chapter of Genesis.

In the beginning... God worked....

I wonder if that is a shock to you. When the hours of work mount up on us, it is tempting for everyone to imagine that work is part of what is wrong with the world – but in the opening chapters of the Bible, before anything has gone wrong in the world, God is described as working. He created the heavens and the earth and his creative activity is described as him working. Listen as I emphasise how that is mentioned repeatedly in verses 1-3 of Genesis 2. ***“¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. ² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³ 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.*”**

With a bit of imagination we can instantly see how what God did is rightly described as work... He made everything out of nothing by his word. That means that He is the ultimate creative genius, and the prototype of what it means to be an entrepreneur. Dreaming dreams and making things happen.

But the label 'work' is equally applicable down to the details of what God did as well. Perhaps you are familiar with the pattern of Genesis 1, breaking the material into six days. Have you noticed how in each day or each area of creation recorded in the chapter, God's creative work was methodical, carefully planned and brilliantly executed? At the end of each stage, God did four things – he classified or filed things away at the end of the day (he named them); he evaluated what he had done – he looked at it; he found pleasure in it pronouncing it good and he rested. Putting his feet up and enjoying a job well done.

The parallels with human work are there to be drawn, aren't they? There is that story of a surgeon and an architect and a politician discussing at a cocktail party which of their professions was the oldest; and the surgeon said, "Well, you remember at the creation when God made Eve, He made her from a rib of Adam? That was the work of a surgeon. You can't get more ancient than that!" Then the architect said, "Ah, but before that God brought order out of chaos. That was the work of an architect and that makes the architect's profession oldest.

"Ah," said the politician, "But who made the chaos?"

My apologies if you find that a bit flippant – because in fact you can probably supply a punchline to that joke from any human job or profession. The point is that God is the original worker.

And notice by the way in passing that the first instance of work recorded in the Bible – God working - was not paid employment at all. That must mean that earning money is not necessarily the defining characteristic of work.

I take it that is a huge encouragement to us if we are not actually paid for work - if we're retired, or working as a full-time homemaker, or if we're currently unemployed. We may not be salaried for volunteer works in the community or cooking meals and cleaning clothes; but meaningful work is still possible, even if we are not paid for it.

What is certain is that we cannot despise work if God is himself a worker. In the beginning God worked. And more than that... God called on men and women at Creation to join him in the work.

Let me read those vitally important words in Genesis 1 describing the creation of the man and the woman:

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."

***²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.***

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Look again at verse 26. It could read as, "**Let us make man as our image, according to our likeness.**" Man is not just in the image of God, he is the image of God on earth. The verse is not telling us what man is like, so much as what man is to be and to do. He is to be the image of God on earth.

God was the Creator, the Lord, the Ruler, so what is humanity to be and to do? He is to rule. "**Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness ... and let them rule.**" This explains what it means for humanity to be the image of God.

As God worked in creation and now rules over all He has created, so humans are to work in and to rule over his creation. What an awesome responsibility!

In chapter two, some further brushstrokes are applied to this idea. The key verse for me to mention is probably Chapter 2:15, if you would be good enough to look at that... ¹⁵ **The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.**

Then within a few verses the woman is created as a helper suitable for him, a partner in this work.

God didn't plant a garden whose flowers would blossom and fruit ripen all on its own; he appointed a gardener to cultivate the soil. It's sometimes called the 'cultural mandate'.

I like the story of the cockney gardener who was showing a clergyman the beauty of his garden, with its borders in full bloom. The clergyman was impressed and broke out in spontaneous praise of God. But the gardener wasn't exactly happy that God should get all the credit. 'You should 'ave seen this 'ere garden when Gawd 'ad it all to 'isself!' Which is absolutely right. Without a human gardener, any plot goes quickly to rack and ruin.

We often stress God's part in the work of caring for his world. Think of the harvest hymn:

We plough the fields and scatter

The good seed on the land,

But it is fed and watered

By God's almighty hand.

But a well-known preacher has rewritten that verse, putting the emphasis just as truthfully on our activity:

God plants the lovely garden

And gives the fertile soil;

But it is kept and nurtured

By man's resourceful toil.

To affirm that is not pride; it is simply a fact. Yes – God provides soil, seed, sun and showers – but we must do the ploughing, sowing and reaping.

Martin Luther, the 16th century German theologian put it like this: 'God gives the wool, but not without our labour. If it is on the sheep it makes no garment'.

Now then – put these two thoughts that we have considered together: that God is himself a worker and that he enlists human beings to work as well.

Does that not tell you that what we do with our lives here on this earth matters very much indeed? It matters that God should be able to look at the work of my hands and pronounce it very good, just as He looked at the work of His own hands and saw that all He had made was very good.

It means that there is a spiritual audit to be done on our work, both what it is achieving and on how we are doing it. I hope this little series over the next month is an opportunity to do that spiritual audit. To ask: 'What am I achieving? How am I conducting myself in the achieving of it? Does God pronounce it good?' Because, if He doesn't, why am I doing it?

Maybe some of us are at a mid career stage where we need to ask searching questions as to whether the course we have been pursuing in our work is one we should continue to pursue. When you're climbing a hill you get to a midway point where you can look back over the height gained and then you can look onwards and say – 'Aha now I see where this is going to end up'.

If you are in your forties like I am, it's well worth asking the question: 'is where I am projected to end up on my current path, where I really want to be in twenty-five years time?'

We need to ask of our careers - what do they add to the sum of human happiness? How are they playing a part in God's purposes that we should care for his world? Does God say, "That's a very good thing to be doing."?

We need to have the courage to ask those questions of our child-rearing – because that too is work: what does God think of how we are doing it?

If you're unemployed now or in the future, again: will you see your life in this perspective? The fact that you don't have salaried employment at some moment may be way out of your control, but that does not mean that God may not look at your life and say, "Very good. These activities are just what I want you to be doing."

It's not the approval of other people that matters. It's not what our parents, our friends, our wives, our husbands think of what we're doing. It's not winning our children's respect and it's not human rewards.

It's not salary, status, security. It's God's verdict that we seek because it is God's work we do. So don't despise your work or have a low view of it

Let's sum up under this heading before we move on: this surely is one area where we can be distinctive. In a culture where everyone is inclined to moan about work, Christians should be different. Work is good. We must not despise work if it is part of God's created order.

Work is not an intermission from the main action, something we do – and hopefully quickly - so we can then get on with other things, like enjoying our leisure activities or having fantastic holidays; it is an integral part of the main action, an intrinsic part of our walk with God

Don't despise work – it is part of God's created world order

But we need to add a second heading to reflect the fact that the perfect, sinless world of Genesis 1 and 2 is no longer our world today.

Don't despise work – it is part of God's created world order

But equally don't idealise work – it is part of God's fallen world order. When the man and the woman disobey God in Genesis chapter 3, because they are God's image in the world, the created order immediately and from then on suffers a terrible dislocation.

You will remember in that reading that God's judgement fell on the serpent, on man on the woman and on the earth – and work was one area which was affected. Let me focus on Genesis 3:16-19:

***¹⁶ To the woman he said,
"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;
with pain you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you."***

***¹⁷ To Adam he said, "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.***

***¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.***

***¹⁹ 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."***

So for Eve part of the curse is that relating to her husband will be painful and giving birth is painful (which is a significant part of her contribution to God's creative plan – being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth is no longer if you will forgive the pun 'a walk in a park'.

That's not of course to say that a woman's only work is child-rearing. But this hugely significant female work is made much harder in a fallen world.

For Adam too work becomes painful, frustrating and unrewarding. Even After the fall, in God's good world, the positives about work are still there, and there is no reversal of the command to subdue the earth. But many end up in jobs which are frustrating or don't have much to do with the stewardship of God's creation, and for all of us work is sometimes very tough.

And how we need to remember the thorns and thistles aspect of work in a fallen world. If we don't we will have completely unrealistic expectations of our work. If we buy into the myth that there is somewhere out there a job which will be perfectly fulfilling, we will probably never be satisfied with our work. We will move on from job to job, imagining that the next one will be better.

When work is tough, we need to count to ten and just say three words to ourselves: 'thorns and thistles'. When the sheer tedium of a task hits us like a wall... or the struggle of things not working out as they are supposed to, of projects started and left unfinished, or the exhaustion of working with difficult colleagues, computers crashing, oil spills beyond simple solutions, or whatever the set back is: the boredom of factory floor, pressure of management, unruly children. That is just part of God's judgement on human work in a fallen world: We shouldn't be surprised: Remember those three words 'thorns and thistles' and keep going.

Of course the fall also affects work indirectly. In a fallen, sinful world, work is just one more opportunity for humans to express their sinfulness.

In Genesis 11, we see mankind banding together to work for a common goal – the godless tower of Babel. Work becomes an expression of human pride and rebellion. And throughout human history, the workplace has been characterised by injustice, exploitation, immorality, cheating, greed and arrogance – which only adds to the difficulties we will experience in our work.

So I hope we can grasp that second point: we must not despise work: it is part of God's created world order; but equally we must not idealise work – and certainly we must not idolise it: it is part of God's fallen world order.

Now we must hold those two things together. We must not let the good parts of work mean we idealise it: it cannot be wholly fulfilling in a fallen world; nor however must we let the negative aspects of work mean we despise it or degrade it. It is a good and godly thing to do.

One final hugely important footnote...

When you consider that God is a worker in creation **and** that he calls on human beings to be his image and to work, it's no surprise that the human being who reflects God's image perfectly, Jesus Christ, was himself a worker.

He was a carpenter by trade in his early life, and then a man of action who as Peter puts it went about doing good, using his life to make a positive impact on his world, feeding, caring, healing. Where the first Adam failed to rule over God's world as he should, Jesus the perfect human being succeeded. And for those three years the curse on creation was put in reverse.

Of course his greatest work was to die on the cross for our sins. It was his greatest work because it not only deals with our sins, but with all the consequences of our sins. It makes a

new creation possible, a new creation where the negatives of work as we know it will one day be eliminated.

So through Christ forgiving us our sin and changing us to be the people we are meant to be we can know meaningful service and work: not just in our church activity, but in our daily nine to five existence. We will experience work perfectly in heaven; and we will experience it increasingly in this life as well – so make sure you come back to find out more next week.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)