

A service of evening prayer

This service was first written and compiled by Revd Phil Jump for the evening prayer that opened ICF's AGM in October 2006. It can be copied and adapted for use in any gathering that brings Christians together at the end of the working day.

Call to worship (based on Psalm 50)

Leader: The Mighty God, summons us to His presence
That He may speak and we may hear
His eyes see not only our acts of worship
But the everyday lives in which our worship is wrought
His ears hear not only our recitals of praise
But the words we have spoken in every place we have been

Response: **Lord God whose gaze extends beyond our worship
To the lives we have lived and the people we are
We enter your presence
Not to escape our world or distinguish you from it
But because we recognise that in You
All things have their being**

Leader: The mighty God summons us to His presence
We come at what for many will be the end of the working day
The takings are counted
Tools are cleaned
Files are put away
Sites are secured
And commuter filled trains begin to leave the busy city

Response: **God, Maker of all things,
Whose work of creation reached its climax in Your Sabbath rest
We rest in Your presence
Not to disregard the world of work and commerce
But to offer to You the labours of the day
As a living sacrifice of worship and praise.**

Psalm 145 (selection)

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise
His greatness is unsearchable

One generation commends your works to another
They tell of Your mighty acts.
They speak of the glorious splendour of Your majesty
And I will meditate on your wonderful works
They tell of the power of Your awesome works
And I will proclaim your great deeds

They celebrate Your abundant goodness
And joyfully sing of Your righteousness
The Lord is gracious and compassionate
Slow to anger and rich in love
The Lord is good to all
He has compassion on all He has made

All your works praise You, Lord
Your faithful people extol You
They tell of the glory of Your Kingdom
And speak of Your might
So that all humanity may know of Your mighty acts
And the glorious splendour of Your Kingdom
Your Kingdom is an everlasting kingdom
And your dominion endures through all generations

Reflection:

It is very easy to read Scripture and emerge with a quite negative view of the world of work. The opening narrative tells us that when His labours of creation were complete, God rested and ordained that day as holy. It is not difficult to construct the belief that if this day is holy, then the things from which one refrains are somehow unholy.

And of course the narrative goes on to describe that great moral catastrophe that we call "the fall", the outcome of which according to Genesis 3 is the introduction of painful toil, the sweat of the brow - while of course for women, "labour" takes on a whole new meaning!

Even in the New Testament this negative view can be easily reinforced, taking for example the story of Jesus angrily marching into the temple and driving out the animal traders and money changers. Is this not a wholesale condemnation of anyone who tries to bring the world of trade and commerce within the confines of God's presence?

Yet I would argue even these stories are in fact an affirmation of the world of work. The labours described in Genesis 1 are not somehow unholy or secondary – as each day's work is completed the storyteller affirms that "it was good". These acts of creation find themselves again and again to be the centrepiece of worship as the Psalmist affirms "*your works are wonderful, I know that full well*" (Ps 139v14). Even if the outcome of creation has become fallen, the act of creation is not so tainted. And the grammar and syntax of the Hebrew text suggests that God's "Sabbath" was not so much a resting *from* his work of creation, but resting *in* its completion.

Equally we can note that in Genesis 3, it is not work that is cursed because of mankind's actions but the ground. In fact we could argue that the punishment inflicted is not so much the introduction of work, but a reduction of mankind's capacity to work through the physical exhaustion that it will now entail. And of course as we look closely at Jesus' actions in the temple it was not the process of trading that He condemned, but the fact that it had become a barrier rather than a means of access to God's presence. The traders had taken over the court of the Gentiles in defiance of God's ordinance that there should be room for the alien and the stranger, and their profiteering meant that the poor would struggle to participate in worshipping a God with particular concern for the widow and the orphan.

By making us in his image, God places within us the desire and capacity to mimic the creator, and in so doing introduces the capacity and necessity to work. The commission to "*replenish the earth and subdue it*" (Genesis 1:28) is given to humanity as part of God's purpose before the fall, not in consequence of it. But like the traders in the temple, we can all too easily turn the world of work into something that obscures that image of God within us, crushes our sense of human identity and acts as a barrier to God's presence.

The heart of our purpose in being here is to reclaim that world of work and in particular to re-shape our understanding of work into what I believe God intended it to be. There is a well worn cliché that asks the question "Do you work to live or live to work?" This introduces to us the reality that it is possible for two individuals to perform exactly the same task with completely different understandings of what they are doing and why they are doing it.

This reality came home to me two summers ago when I had the privilege of being on the management council of "Merseyfest" – a major Christian event that brought young people from across Britain together to work in local communities in Merseyside. In one of the local projects a team of Merseyfest delegates worked alongside some young offenders who had been sentenced to community service, to renovate the seating in a local park. On the first day the difference between the two groups was obvious, the young Christians were excited and enthusiastic as they saw themselves contributing to a process of transformation that was happening across the region, the young offenders resented the task they had been given and seemed concerned only to clock up the hours of their sentence with as little effort as possible.

But as the week went on, the attitude of the young offenders began to change, one even came back to help complete the task after he had worked the specified number of hours in his sentence. By seeing our work as a participation in the activities of our creator God, by discovering within it a new expression of what it means to be made in His image, that which might be seen as imposition and drudgery is transformed into an act of creativity and fulfilment. When Christians display such an attitude to their own work, it can have a transforming effect on the workplace as a whole.

Of course not every individual has the opportunity to discover such a sense of vocation within their work, and it seems that an important part of our task is not simply to highlight this possibility, but to challenge those who use their power and control of the world of work to deny it and exploit others for their own ends. But such instances should not cause us to condemn work per-se, or what is perhaps more common, to simply exclude it from our understanding of what it means to be Christian, but to recognise those who are today's temple traders and raise our prophetic voice against them. We come together into God's presence at the end of a working day, not to turn our backs on the world of work, but so that we may look at it with fresh understanding and enthusiasm.

Hymn

When the church of Jesus shuts its outer door
Lest the roar of traffic drown the voice of prayer
May our prayers, Lord make us ten times more aware
That the world we banish is our Christian care

If our hearts are lifted where devotion soars
High above this hungry suffering world of ours
Lest our hymns should drug us to forget its needs
Forge our Christian worship into Christian deeds

Lest the gifts we offer, money, talents, time
Serve to salve our conscience to our secret shame
Lord reprove inspire us by the way you give
Teach us dying Saviour how true Christians live.

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Prayers of Thanksgiving

We thank you for the joy of work complete. The final sentence on the written page, the last brushstroke on a painted wall, the finishing touch, the sigh of relief, the shared satisfaction of a job well done. Thank you that in human achievement we catch of glimpse of what it means to be made in Your likeness.

O God whose works are wonderful

Our grateful thanks we bring

We thank you for the challenge of work unfinished. The piece that needs completing, the pattern that needs making, the words that have yet to be written. Outcomes to influence; lessons to learn; relationships to form. Thank you that in human endeavour we hear the echo of your commission to be builders of your Kingdom.

O God whose works are wonderful

Our grateful thanks we bring

We thank you for the privilege of work that fulfils us; The part we always wanted, the job we dreamed of, the role that comes naturally. The satisfied customer, the support of colleagues, the joy of success. Thank you that in human vocation we sense the reality that You have a plan and purpose for each of us.

O God whose works are wonderful

Our grateful thanks we bring

We thank you for the struggle of work that is difficult. The task that is wearisome, the colleague who is difficult, the deal that simply will not close. For the opportunity to be stretched and refined through disappointment and adversity. To better understand the plight of others who seldom realise their potential. We thank you that through human suffering we touch the shadow of your cross as you walk beside us in it.

O God whose works are wonderful

Our grateful thanks we bring

Prayers of Confession and Intercession

Loving God, we pray for those for whom work has become drudgery and toil. Forgive us if we have failed to reflect Your light into the darkness of their experience, or have left unchallenged those who make it so for them.

Reigning God, we pray for those whose personal gain through the world of work has numbed their sense of true vocation and compassion for fellow human beings. Forgive us if we have shown the same indifference in pursuit of what we consider to be important and help us to be examples of what it means to accumulate riches in heaven.

Caring God, we pray for those whose work calls them to express care and compassion for fellow human beings. Help them to see every client as made in Your image and loved by You, whatever circumstances in which they are found. Forgive us if we devalue such roles, or allow the presence of caring professionals to somehow excuse us from our own responsibilities towards others.

Companion God, we pray for ourselves in the various tasks that our lives set before us. Forgive us if we have sought to do things in our own strength and help us to turn to You not only in those things we find difficult but also the things we seem able to do well. Help us to accept every task as a gift of opportunity from You.

Holy God, we offer to You every action that has taken place in this city today and every individual who is affected by them. Strengthen that which is good, challenge that which is misguided, thwart that which is evil and forgive that which is wrong. In the name of Christ we pray

AMEN