

Work Matters

ICF Chair Phil Jump asks whether work can be too easily overlooked.

The talk of Britain at the moment seems to be the incredible performance from Team GB at the London 2012 Olympics, achieving a breathtaking haul of medal at what always promised to be a significant “home games”. One particularly strong and successful presence was that of the cycling team, who have utterly dominated the sport for several years now. As it turned out, Bradley Wiggin’s sensational “tour de France” victory was little more than a curtain raiser for the gold rush that came barely a fortnight later.

It was at the Barcelona Olympics of 1992 that Chris Boardman led the revival of British cycling on his now legendary super bike. The distinctive hardware that he introduced, not without controversy, is now commonplace. While no-one can deny his personal physical achievement, it was Boardman who pioneered a whole new understanding of this kind of sport. Success at the highest level does not only require first class athletes, but technicians, engineers and innovators of equivalent calibre. Team GB owes its on-going success, not only to a generation of riders who have been inspired by those early performances, but also to remaining at the cutting edge of design and technology.

I was interested therefore to hear many media commentators speak with enthusiasm of the various internet sites, “apps” and “live-streams” that you could “*access at work to make sure that you don’t miss a moment of the action.*” In doing so, it did not seem to dawn on our celebrity presenters, that despite the presence of such technology in most workplaces in our land, people turn up there because they actually have a job to do. In their eyes, work seemed to be little more than an inconvenient requirement to be separated from one’s television for a few hours.

It is interesting how work so often seems to be the “poor relation” in our land, portrayed more as an

interruption than a vocation, thus requiring our gratitude for the innovation and dedication of broadcasters for finding ways of minimising the inconvenience of having to be there. Yet in reality, work is not an intrusion or obstacle to be negotiated in such circumstances, but the foundation on which such events, and the euphoria they generate, depend. It is because someone turned up for work that our cyclists have these amazing machines to ride on; because of the dedication of thousands of workers that there was transport, power, safety, security and a myriad of other logistics on which the various events utterly depended.

But before being too hard on our broadcasters, perhaps we should ask whether the Church is often equally guilty of a similarly dismissive attitude. Even if unintentional, we can often create a faith environment where work is thoughtlessly portrayed as something of a minor distraction in the midst of far loftier pursuits. But that common human endeavour in which we all engage in some way or other, is not only the hidden foundation of any aspect of our shared existence, whether sport, religion or anything else – it is part of what it means to be human.

We often speak of the need to better connect faith and work, and while this has to be founded in a more holistic understanding of our Christian identity, this is perhaps a mission in which we also need to engage in a far broader context. If work is nothing more than a necessary evil, then life in all its fullness becomes something of an impossible dream for anyone whose time is largely occupied with their employment. To what degree is a more positive attitude to work, a key component in that invocation to “*not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by a renewing of our minds?*”