Reaping what we have sown

Why reclaiming a Christian understanding of the nature and purpose of work is increasingly necessary. (FIBQ – Dec 2013)

As fast as the dust settles on the last public outcry against the practices and activities of the banking sector, another one seems to emerge. So it is that the latest "scandal" to hit the headlines is the claim that publically owned RBS has been deliberately forcing small businesses to go under. Despite this being the subject of Commons Select Committee enquiries and Government-backed reports, it seems hard to discern whether these are vague accusations or proven realities, though Bank of England governor Mark Carney is on record as describing such behaviour as *"a fundamental violation of the integrity of the banking relationship" (1).* In short it has been argued that the bank stood to gain more through a small business's failure than its success, so deliberately engineered their demise.

Those who are rushing to the bank's defence argue that it simply does not make sense for a financial institution to act in such a way. But whether or not the underlying allegations are proven, it has to be admitted that Western economies are now structured in a way that in the right circumstances there is compelling logic for commercial banks to do exactly what RBS has been accused of.

As the story began to break, I was reminded of a previous conversation with the redundant workers of a well-known retail chain. They had worked hard to turn their company around from a position of major loss, and by all reports were succeeding. But that was when the problems set in; they spoke of how those whose investment had enabled the company to move forward had secured a *profit bond*, whereby if the company failed to achieve a specified level of return, they had the rights to liquidate and realise the company's assets. Even though it was now generating a modest return, it could not deliver to second (and third) hand investors anything like the same financial reward as wholesale closure and sell-off. And with those who stood to gain most, so removed from the social and moral Decimplications of their actions, their bottom line was the loudest and pretty much unchallenged dictator of the way forward.

A generation has now passed since as a fresh-faced graduate trainee, I was introduced to the world of corporate management, but I still remember one the earliest mantras that was impressed upon me. *"Your primary function is not to manufacture a product, provide employment or to cultivate skills – these things are simply a means to an end – your primary function is to make money – your job is to find the most effective means possible to make money"* And I believed it – coming from a background in engineering, I had yet to discover the academic world of the arts where one meta-narrative might be compared or challenged by another – this was presented as fact, and I had little reason or opportunity to question it.

And of course if the sole purpose of owning and operating a business is to make money, then why not sell it off, maximise the return and move on to the next deal? Whether or not the accusations laid at the door of RBS are justified, what cannot be denied is that most businesses now operate in an environment where precisely these actions are both logical and likely to best serve the interests of those with the most power and influence. Those who create or allow such situations might well be reasonable and intelligent people, but they are reasonable and intelligent people who operate in a corporate culture that for a generation has been indoctrinated with the belief that success and virtue is measured by the amount of money you make. Unless that underlying dogma is rigorously and relentlessly challenged, then reasonable people will continue to do unreasonable things.

And of course British business has quickly learned to re-structure itself around short term financial gain – coal mines have been closed because more money can be made through importing and re-selling fuel from abroad; acres of manufacturing capacity have been replaced by retail parks, because they can generate more profit per square foot. Those of us who questioned how a nation could remain economically viable while shedding so much of its productive capacity and residual skills, were assured that the Square-Mile had it covered; there was plenty of GNP to be generated through buying and selling complicated financial products that were associated with the wholesale export of our manufacturing sector – in fact the one place in the world that could generate more financial return per square foot than just about anywhere else on the planet, was one where people dressed up in suits and produced no tangible commodities whatsoever.

I remember on one occasion being asked by a charity if I could hire a van and drive into the City to pick up some extremely high quality office furniture that was being generously donated by a firm of brokers. It was only when I saw what it was being replaced with that I could begin to understand why anyone would want to give it away. As we loaded it, I casually asked the donor "What do you do here?" and received the equally casual response "we buy and sell third world debt". To this day I still cannot work out whether I was more staggered by the fact that so much money could be made out of other people's poverty, or the sheer indifference with which his response was given. If nothing else, such encounters have left me relatively unsurprised by various revelations that have emerged from the financial sector in recent years. What RBS is now accused of doing to the nice plumber down the road seems to have been the experience of entire communities in more distant parts of the world for decades.

Finance has become a product, and thus requires the most efficient means possible to produce it. What was once the means, reward and enabler of material production is now an end in itself. And as an ever more diverse and complex range of "financial products" confront the needy investor, so indeed it becomes possible through hedge funds, insurance bonds and various other "parachute clauses" to invest in a way where the financial demise of a particular enterprise offers a better return than moderate success.

Of course in such circumstances, companies like RBS offer themselves as a useful scapegoat, and while I would not condone the practices of which they are accused, I suspect that they are much more an example of an increasing "norm" than a deplorable rogue who has stepped out of line.

A generation might well have passed since my ideals of a workplace that is first and foremost a centre of fulfilling activity and common, creative endeavour were so roundly challenged, but as the "we only exist to make money" mantra has increasingly become the un-opposed norm, perhaps it is only now that we are beginning to realise the full human implications of this dogma. We stand in detached outrage and wonder how on earth respectable professionals can behave in such a way, and conveniently forget that they are only doing what we have asked them to do. These are the people to whom we have entrusted the management of savings, pension-funds and mortgage endowments, and we are quick to criticise and demand compensation when they fail to deliver the returns we were expecting.

If making money is the primary purpose of work, then what else can we do but judge the value of any individual's contribution to society by the amount of it that they generate? Little surprise then that incentive and reward finds expression in a bonus-culture of staggering proportion. As long as making money is the key end of our common endeavour, logic cannot lead us to any other conclusion.

It is naïve to suggest that wealth creation is therefore entirely wrong, but in seeking to restore to work its identity as a means of human fulfilment and cohesion, perhaps we might also re-explore the idea of profit in terms of that Old (and New) Testament idea of community prosperity rather than personal gain. Wellbeing can indeed be measured in financial terms, but it is by no means the sole indicator, and our society will always be the poorer while we afford it such unwarranted status.

I suspect it will not be long before the next misdemeanour of the financial sector finds its way into popular consciousness, and while it will no doubt provide ample opportunity to highlight the splinters in the eyes of the bankers, perhaps we might also reflect on what planks it reveals in the eyes of society as a whole. Reconnecting faith values and the world of work is no mere side-line for the enthusiasts; it is a vital necessity for a society that is crying out for a different financial narrative.

(1) Mark Carney giving evidence to the Treasury Select Committee – November 2013