

Professions of Faith

Exploring workplace themes in the Revised Common
Lectionary



February 2012

Welcome to Professions of Faith. These notes and reflections are offered as a resource for preachers, leaders and clergy to provide ideas and suggestions for how Sunday worship can relate to the working lives of a congregation. They seek to offer connections between the set lectionary readings for the day and key workplace themes. We recognise that these do not always represent the key thrust of the passages, or indeed the intent of including them within the lectionary schedule. They are intended as a companion for more overtly exegetical and liturgical resources, and while every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of the Biblical references, we can accept no responsibility for errors or omissions, and recommend the use of recognised publications produced for that purpose.

February 5th – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

It could be argued that the world of work comprises two core elements. The first of these is what could be called the organisational aspect of enterprise and commerce; companies have managers, supervisors, directors and consultants, while society is regulated and overseen by various political figures and statutory bodies. The subsequent structures within the world of work at their best can enable and release us, and at worst can become oppressive and abusive.

Work also involves an element that we might describe as its operational aspect; we process commodities, maintain stock, produce goods etc. The two Old Testament readings reflect how each of these exists and is sustained under God's rule and power. Isaiah reminds us that the rulers of the earth are as nothing compared to the greatness of God; their reigns are fleeting compared to His eternal nature. The Psalmist speaks to a community whose economy was largely agricultural, and reminds them that their flocks and herds, and the pastures on which they rely, are part of His provision.

We might use these Scriptures to remind a congregation that although the economies in which we work and operate are quite different from those of the Biblical narratives, God is no less the source and ruler of everything on which the world of work is reliant.

The story of Peter's mother-in-law highlights her role as a home-maker and provider of hospitality. This provides opportunity to recognise and pray for those who work as home-makers or in other ways look after people in their homes. A congregation might also be invited to pray for those for whom, in various contexts, their home is their main place of work.

February 12th – Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

2 Kings 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45; Psalm 30

There is a very strong workplace theme in this week's readings, particularly the one from 2 Kings. It is through being in the lowest of positions in the household of Naaman, that a young Israelite is able to influence the lives of people that many would describe as far more significant. There are many in the world of work who will feel trapped or restricted, or even that they are caught in situations of injustice or forced to become complicit in things that are not of their choosing. This episode might be used to help reflect and recognise that even in the most adverse of circumstances, God can still use us for the well-being of those with whom we work and interact.

Recognising the common theme of leprosy, a congregation might be encouraged to remember and pray for those who are involved in the cure and containment of infectious and harmful diseases today. This could include prayers for those involved in research into new drugs and treatments, health education and prevention programmes etc.

February 19th - Last Sunday after Epiphany

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

The Old Testament reading tells in somewhat stylised and dramatic terms the story of Elisha's succession as prophetic leader, quite literally taking the mantle of his mentor Elijah. There are a number of potential applications of this episode into the world of work. There may be those going through situations of change in their working lives, perhaps having taken on new responsibilities, adapting to a new manager or supervisor, or perhaps preparing for or coming to terms with retirement. There may also be opportunity to pray for or encourage those involved in training, mentoring or in other ways equipping individuals to take on responsibility within the world of work.

The Gospel reading presents a significant episode in the ministry of Jesus, as he is transfigured before his closest disciples. One of the enduring themes from this narrative is Peter's desire to "*preserve the moment*" by building tabernacles in which the visitors can remain; but the moment passes and the challenge for the disciples is to come down from the mountain, and live in the everyday world in the light of their experience. This story strikes at the heart of our worship experiences; we come together that we might glimpse more fully the nature of the risen Christ. While as a community of God's people, our shared life may provide those spiritual havens to inspire and strengthen us in our faith journey, they must not become an end in themselves, but equip us to engage with the world around us as followers of the risen Christ. This story may beckon us to the mountain top, but it also commissions us to live out our faith in the midst of the working week. This theme is echoed in Paul's words to the Christians at Corinth.

February 26th – First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

God's covenant with Noah is yet another reminder that the cycles and seasons of nature, on which so much of our work and commerce is founded, is reliant on the goodness and providence of God. We are invited to recognise afresh that our working lives cannot be separated from our understanding and relationship with the Creator God. Although the elements of judgement in the Noah story might not always be easy themes to embrace, they highlight God's concern for the whole of His creation. This is emphasised through Peter's reflections on the Noah story. God does not judge humanity simply by our religious activity and ritual, but by our actions and attitudes in the whole of life. Thus we are again reminded that the values and purposes of our business and commerce, are matters of concern to our Creator. A challenge for us all is the degree to which this is reflected in the way that we engage in the world of work; it might also serve as a challenge to the Church in defining her role in promoting business ethics and good practices.

The Psalm might offer itself as a response to these thoughts. Through its words we recognise our need of God's guidance and forming in our faith journey. It is easy to encounter a phrase like "show me your ways" as inviting God to help us trace a spiritual path that is increasingly remote from the everyday realities of life. A congregation might be invited to focus on their identity as consumers, employers and employees, customers, service providers and service users. From this perspective we might see the Psalm as inviting God to guide our thoughts and actions in these contexts.

**Loving God, on whom all things depend;
Whose creation and care is the foundation of all on which our society is founded,
May our worship of You, and our visions of Your Kingdom
Never detach us from the world in which our lives are rooted,
But equip us to live as Your servants within it. AMEN**