

Professions of Faith

Exploring workplace themes in the Revised Common
Lectionary



January 2012

January 1st – New Year

Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21; Psalm 8
(alternative NT Epistle: **Philippians 2:5-11**)

Today is New Year's day and for many congregations there will be an inevitable sense of looking forward to what 2012 has in store. It will also be the Sunday before many people return to the world of work after the Christmas break. For some this will involve a sense of anticipation of new projects and challenges, for others it may well invoke feelings of foreboding as they once again face difficult and troubling situations at work. There may also be a deep sense of uncertainty within many, as the difficult economic times continue to generate insecurity and unease in many business and commercial contexts. There is good cause to pray with sensitivity and awareness for the working lives of our communities.

There is a natural theme in today's readings of having an identity that is rooted in Christ. The Old Testament reading is a statement of blessing, asking that God's presence and favour might rest on every aspect of our being. In each of the Epistle readings, we are reminded that Christ has given us a new identity, and his is the attitude we are called to reflect within our daily lives. The Psalm speaks of the created order, on which our working lives is founded, as having its origin and belonging in God. A key challenge which arises from these passages is how we reflect these realities in the daily lives to which we are now returning.

The Gospel reading is a powerful reminder that even in the most mundane of everyday tasks, God's presence can surprise us. It was because of their working identity that the night-shift shepherds found themselves as the first to hear of God's new dawn of Salvation. It was their willingness to encounter God in the unexpected and ordinary that brought them to the stable and established their place in history.

January 8th – 1st Sunday after Epiphany

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Today's readings help us to explore and remember the Baptism of Jesus - this connects us again to the theme of identity through our own Baptism, and so the challenge is raised again, how do we live as followers of Jesus in the everyday business of work and commerce?

There is also a strong message of God's presence in everything through the work and person of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the life force of creation, hovering expectantly over the waters of the earth; it is the Spirit who brings life and new birth to Christian believers, strengthening and equipping them to live out their faith in a difficult world. We often speak of the Holy Spirit in relation to our worship and internal life as church communities, the Scripture readings this Sunday provide an obvious platform to be reminded that the Spirit equips us for every aspect of our lives. God's Spirit is at work in our world and at its best, work enables us to participate in the stewardship, harvesting and renewing of creation. Work provides us with the potential to discover where that same Spirit who was present at the dawn of creation, might be hovering and working amidst the molecules, structures and processes of God's world today.

Psalm 29 offers a powerful connection between our worship and the everyday lives that we live. Verse 9 portrays the temple congregation declaring God's glory, yet depicts them as just one element in a rule and reign that stretches across nations and kingdoms. The wonders and symbols of the natural world and the realities encountered through lives lived beyond the confines of the sanctuary, are all dependant upon the God who is the focus of their worship. The Psalm invites its readers to consider and explore where God might be at work beyond their worship gathering; this is an instinct we do well to foster in our world today.

January 15th - 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

The resounding message of this week's readings is of a God who sees us in every place and every situation of our lives. Paul makes this point graphically in his letter to the Corinthians; it is no less profoundly made through the beautiful language of the Psalm. This might be applied to the world of work on two levels. There is the perhaps obvious angle that we should conduct ourselves within our everyday working lives conscious of God's presence and awareness of our situation. Many within our congregations may well be finding the world of work difficult and troubling, this might be because it is a difficult pastoral environment for Christians, or perhaps because the organisation they work for is facing its own difficulties. There is a message of re-assurance in these words; God does not abandon us in the midst of our everyday lives, but sees and knows all that we are facing. Our worship is an opportunity to be reminded of this reality, and to lay the struggles of our working lives before God.

The Old Testament reading might offer some other angles on the world of work. In many respects this is Samuel's moment of vocation—this might lead to reflecting how everyone can perceive the job they do as a vocation and calling. This needs to be done with sensitivity to how work is not always experienced in such terms, and how work for many can become a means of exploitation and drudgery. Recognising Samuel's youth might lead a congregation to recognise the growing difficulties faced by young people in finding work and employment and to pray for those affected by this.

January 22nd – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62: 6-14; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1:14-20

It would be easy to interpret today's Gospel reading as depicting the world of work as something to be left behind in our desire to be followers of Jesus. But these disciples never lost their identity as fishermen, and rather we might couple it with the other readings to recognise that Christ's rule, authority and calling extends to the daily tasks that we engage in. For the people of Jonah's time, Nineveh represented a regime that seemed opposed and contrary to their own values and ideals. We might reflect on how our working lives have become ruled by economic regimes which are not dissimilar. But God's message is clear; He neither abandons such entities nor believes them to be beyond redemption. To what degree does Jonah represent the contemporary people of God - called not to live out their faith within the safe haven of a faith community, but within the world which Christ has come to redeem. This Sunday offers a fresh opportunity to re-centre our working lives on the living Christ.

January 29th – 4th Sunday after Epiphany

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

The themes of God's rule and influence over every aspect of our being are again echoed in today's readings. The New Testament Epistle might offer a particular focus on the world of work. We often apply the language of idolatry, in today's context, to issues of materialism, greed, status and celebrity etc. These are realities that many of us will confront in the world of work, and like the Corinthian believers are faced with the challenge of how we live within a community where such things are commonplace and at times inescapable, yet at the same time remain true to our faith calling. Paul explores the difficult balance between expressing our liberty in Christ, yet living in a way which does not become a "stumbling block" to others. There is much to be gained by simply recognising that God's New Testament people faced similar struggles and ethical dilemmas to those we face today; we might also note that Paul's approach avoids judgemental and simplistic responses.

**God of all being, whose influence and authority stretch beyond anything we can imagine.
Help us discover Your presence in every aspect of our lives,
When we rejoice in our achievements, wrestle with each challenge and struggle amidst adversity.
May we never doubt that we do so within the bounds of your love and care.**