

Professions of Faith

Exploring workplace themes in the Revised Common Lectionary



May 2013

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 offered 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.

May 5th – Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29 or John 5:1-9.

Today's readings have a distinctly international flavour to them. The man from Macedonia beckons Paul and his missionary companions to venture to new shores, while the theme of the Psalm and the vision from Revelation is of nations drawn together to find healing and unity within the purposes of God. Many people in our congregations will work for companies with departments, branches and subsidiaries all over the world. Many others will work as part of a supply chain or commercial venture that spreads across the globe. In many respects business and commerce brings the world together - this is often the theme and message of various corporate advertising campaigns.

We might recognise that the Psalm is set in a context of commercial success - "the earth has brought forth her increase"; from the perspective of the Psalmist, the blessing of God and the harnessing and harvesting of the earth's resources are intertwined. These reflections offer a foundation that might be developed in a number of ways:

There is a measure of challenge here - the reflection of the Psalm is that material and economic success alone will not hold the world together. God's rule and God's righteousness lie at the heart of international harmony and well-being, and all nations are invited to seek after these things. At a time when much seems to depend upon the success of world economies, there is a message of both challenge and hope to be found.

There is also scope to consider how the failure to connect economic success with God's righteousness and justice results in ever-growing inequality, and reinforces issues of poverty, division and exploitation.

It can be recognised too, that through trade and commerce, nations do relate and co-operate; economic growth and development can be part and parcel of bringing well-being and healing to nations and communities. There is cause to recognise therefore that what we describe today as economic activity is not intrinsically bad, and can achieve God's purposes. The challenge for God's people is to do their business in ways that achieve this, and to be a prophetic voice in encouraging others to do the same.

The underlying theme of health and healing might also provide opportunity to pray and give thanks for those who work within the health professions, and to recognise the pressures and expectations that face them.

"Healing of the nations" has meaning beyond simply physical well-being, and so a congregation might pray for all those involved in peace-making and peace-keeping; diplomats and envoys who seek to hold nations in harmony and wholesome relationship.

May 12th - Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26.

The localised story of Paul and Silas highlights a universal reality - there are times when the purposes of God's Kingdom fly in the face of those who pursue economic self interest. Whatever lay behind the slave-girl's supernatural insight, it had become the tool of injustice in the hands of her owners. They perceived her as their possession, making her well-being secondary to their desire for personal gain. But these men were part of a

broader system of injustice, not only were they immune to the inhumane way that they behaved, but “the system” reinforced their view, readily punishing Paul and Silas for their intervention; the woman was an economic commodity that they had no right to interfere with, not a human being to whom they could offer release and restoration. Extreme cases of this reality remain in today’s world, particularly highlighted by issues of human trafficking and abuse. While recognising this, a congregation might also acknowledge how work engages us in a world where humanity is often described as a resource, and well-being can often come secondary to economic output.

Christian intervention is no easy option, and for Paul and Silas it meant public humiliation, physical abuse and a denial of their own freedom. God comes to their rescue, and his purposes prevail, but it is not without pain and struggle. The language of the Psalm and the visions of Revelation remind us that from an eternal perspective, God’s purposes will prevail, and yet we live this out in a world that often will be a painful and disturbing place for those who are uncompromising in their Gospel commitment.

These readings connect powerfully with the world of work; they provide opportunity to reflect and pray against injustice and exploitation; they spur those who feel exploited or are persecuted through their stand against what is wrong, to continue believing in God’s eternal rule; they encourage every believer to extend the liberating power of the Gospel to every victim of injustice.

May 19th - Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17, (25-27); Genesis 11:1-9

Today’s readings are laced with images and connections with the world of work. The miraculous way in which the apostles spoke and were understood in the languages of many gathered nations, is often presented as a restoration of the division recorded in the reading of Genesis 11. The story of the City of Babel is the story of unbridled human achievement, self confidence and status; it might reasonably be argued that it is an ancient representation of many of the drivers of corporate success today. Unconstrained, international economic endeavour can become a damaging tower of self interest and power-lust - we might even wonder in the light of Genesis 11, whether some of the recent spectacular economic collapses are evidence of God’s hand continuing to be at work in such contexts.

If this is the backdrop to Pentecost, then we are reminded that the coming of the Spirit is the genesis of transformation in these aspects of our being too. The work of God’s Spirit is not contained by the internal experiences of God’s people, but takes them into the market place and public square to declare a Gospel of transformation centred around the Lordship of Christ and empowered by His Spirit.

This message is reinforced by the sentiments of the Psalm which echo the reminder that trade, commerce and everyday endeavour are not primarily signs of human achievement and self-confidence, but the on-going presence and providence of God. As the Church celebrates in Pentecost, the coming and empowerment of God’s Spirit, so we might ask where that Spirit might be present within our places of work, and how He might empower us to be agents of transformation, reconciliation and healing within them.

May 26th – First Sunday after Pentecost - Trinity Sunday

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

The theme of wisdom is significantly present in today’s readings. The words from Proverbs make clear that the what the writer is describing has its roots in God Himself - it existed with him, even before the world was made. There are some powerful images and ideas that can emerge from this.

Firstly, a congregation might focus on human wisdom. Many might find themselves in workplace situations where they have difficult and demanding decisions to make; others may feel that they are constrained by the wisdom and decision making of others; good or bad. This provides an obvious opportunity to pray for and

seek God's wisdom within the issues and challenges of our working lives.

A further emergent theme is that of God's sovereign purpose. Wisdom has its root in God, and those who display true wisdom do not simply apply their own logic, but seek that which is good; that which is God's purpose. This reality is echoed in the language and sentiment of Psalm 8. God is described as ruler, and humanity is reminded that the positions of power and influence we occupy are granted by God; it is He who has placed us over the various works of His hands. In a world that often considers itself to be in the helpless grips of economic forces and commercial necessity, these thoughts re-calibrate our understanding.

This is further echoed by the sense of scale that is communicated through these readings. Each in a different way highlights the eternal and timeless nature of Divine purpose. The wisdom song traces its roots to a time before human history; the New Testament readings each reach beyond the immediacy of human experience and explore eternal realities.

These thoughts do not diminish the place of work and commerce, but remind us that they belong within the realm of God's rule, and need to be held in this perspective. For those who are afforded power and influence through work, there is a challenging reminder that these things are nothing compared to God; those who feel that work and employment denies them power and freedom can find strength and encouragement by recognising that God's rule of love and mercy prevails above and beyond what they now see and experience.