

# Professions of Faith

Exploring workplace themes in the Revised Common Lectionary



ICF - Faith on Monday Morning

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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.

## July 6<sup>th</sup> – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 11-18 ; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

(alternatives : Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145: 8 - 15)

Like so many Biblical stories, the episode recorded in Genesis 24 takes place almost exclusively in a workplace context. We meet a servant fulfilling his duties and the daughter of a family in the midst of her everyday task of collecting water. It was in the process of this encounter that they became aware of God's presence, guiding and enabling the servant in his rather unusual commission. From this basis, a congregation might be encouraged to reflect on where God might be present in their everyday working lives, and to see them as a place where He might be encountered.

A supplementary theme is that of prosperity, status and wellbeing. Abraham's servant speaks of his master's accomplishments, the daughters of Zion rejoice at the coming of their king; the bearing of children, the joy of marriage and the care and providence of God all come into focus. This might cause us to stop and think about what we do with our wealth and prosperity and the responsibility of those who are financially successful to recognise God as the giver of everything, and their calling to act as wise and just stewards. This throws a very strong focus on the world of work, often described as the place of economic activity. Wealth creation and income generation is not something which can occur in a moral vacuum - our nation has witnessed the worst effects of when this happens in recent years. These readings rightly re-couple the ownership and control of material possessions with a sense of accountability to God. Paul recognises, writing to the Romans, that we can often find it difficult to do what we know to be right.

A prominent theme is that of marriage and relationships, so we might pray for individuals who are involved in weddings and marriage in their employment. This might include wedding planners, wedding dress designers, and the like, along with relationship counsellors, those who work in family courts etc. etc. There is also a strong focus on the dignity of women, so we might reflect on those situations where women continue to feel discriminated against in work, and those who work in issues of equality, women's rights etc.

The focus on the king and royal events, might also cause us to pray for kings, rulers and others in positions of authority.

## July 13<sup>th</sup> – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

**Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

(alternatives: Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65: (1-8), 9-14)

The world of work again features prominently in today's readings. In Jacob and Esau we meet two men with very different professions , each suited to their particular personality. This might remind us of how the job we do is part

and parcel of the person we are, and why it is important therefore that we do not separate out our faith and our work. We might also reflect and pray for those who for various reasons find themselves in jobs and employment situations to which they do not feel well suited. Rebecca's favouritism might cause us to reflect on whether we can sometimes be unfairly judgemental or inappropriately measure people's worth on the basis of the job they do. Jacob's behaviour towards Esau also reminds us that people and companies can sometimes abuse their positions of influence and monopoly to exploit others. This might help a congregation to recognise that we have a responsibility to act justly and fairly in our business dealings. The tensions between these two brothers might also encourage us to pray for those who work in situations of family breakdown, children's services etc.

The New Testament reading is very much rooted in the world of work. By reflecting on the workplace experience of a local farmer, Jesus is able to help his disciples better understand the principles of His Kingdom. The theme of sowing and harvest is also echoed in the Isaiah reading. This could be used as a basis to help a congregation recognise that in our modern world of processed and convenient food, we can too easily forget and overlook the working lives of those who provide these things for us. This could lead to a time of thanksgiving for such individuals. We might also consider how God might speak to us through the tasks that we do and the workplace activities that we are involved in. This could be presented in general terms, or perhaps a member of the congregation might be arranged to share a testimony of how their working life helps them more fully appreciate God's nature and message.

## July 20<sup>th</sup> - Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

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**Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

(alternatives: Isaiah 44:6-8; Psalm 86:11-17)

Psalm 139 reminds us that there is nowhere we can go or be that God is not present. In some respects we might argue that Jacob experiences the reality of this when he spends the night at Bethel, and discovers it to be a place of meeting with God. The obvious application of this is that if we cannot escape God's presence, then when we are at our desks and workbenches or engaged in whatever our Monday to Friday lives might involve, God is there. There is potential here to develop a sermon from this. Some questions we might consider:

How is our attitude and motivation affected by the sense of God being present in our working lives?

How can we find strength through knowing that God is beside us in our struggles and challenges at work?

In what ways might God build "ladders to heaven" through our presence in the world of work?

A key theme throughout these readings is a sense of God's presence and his overriding sovereignty in the midst of our adversity. There is an obvious application here to those whose working lives are difficult and involve conflict and struggle. There are a number of prayers on the ICF website which may be appropriate. The New Testament reading explores this theme, and is rooted in the life of a working farmer. There may be opportunities to re-use some of the ideas from last week.

## July 27<sup>th</sup> – Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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**Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

(Alternatives: Psalm 128; 1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119:129-136)

The world of work again features heavily in this week's readings, particularly the Gospel passage. Although the Genesis story needs to be approached with sensitivity, in relation to how it presents the place of women in an ancient Middle Eastern society, it opens up a significant theme of remuneration and reward. This continues through the Psalms which recount God's reward of peace and prosperity in the land for those who are obedient to Him. This offers a number of potential developments including:

Prayer and reflection on those who are exploited and underpaid in the world of work.

Issues of fair trade and trade justice

On-going industrial disputes and those who work in mediation and conciliation

The work of trade unions, low pay units etc.

The Gospel readings use the world of work to help us explore the values and priorities of God's Kingdom. These might easily be applied to the contemporary workplace:

The image of leaven asks how our presence and influence in the world might achieve the purpose of God's Kingdom. We might particularly note that the leaven needs to be worked into the loaf. So our calling to be a Kingdom people is not realised through remaining separate and isolated within the activities of the church, but engaged in the world around us.

The farmer and the pearl merchant present us with a challenge of what our true priorities are. The purpose of their workplace actions was to realise the treasure of God's Kingdom. We live in a world which will often define the purpose of work simply as the means of achieving economic reward. Work is more than that, it is our engagement with God's on-going creation and sustaining of His world. We too can pursue the priorities of God's Kingdom within our work.

The story of the fishermen reminds us that as a human race we are ultimately accountable to God. Sadly the world of work is littered with examples of individuals and organisations who have lost their sense of accountability, and we can see only too well the danger of allowing economic gain to be the sole driver of human enterprise. The story not only challenges us to conduct our own affairs with a sense of accountability to God, but also reassures those who feel exploited and cheated that God will eventually hold all people to account.

These various stories could also be used as an opportunity to pray for those in the various professions that are featured.

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