

and to glimpse a new theological and ecclesial possibility: “Even after death it is through physical contact, by honouring his body, that [Mary] seeks to express her love of Christ. And when he appears she reaches out to touch it. Yet the time of bodily love, of the love she understands, is past. Christ draws back from one kind of contact and leans forward to offer another, for which the time has not quite come: he is not yet ascended... Mary’s gesture concedes that what she loves is now unattainable in the terms familiar to her, that the fulfilment of her love will not be physical but spiritual. And the anguish of a few minutes before is resolved; because a Lord who cannot be touched is a Lord who cannot be taken away.”⁴⁵

The ideas in this article have been developed from a sermon preached by Rev Simon Reynolds in the Chapel of Christ’s College, Cambridge, in June 2000.

EQUIPPING CHRISTIANS AT WORK

Julian Reindorp

“Nine out of ten practising Christians feel their work is always at the level of a spiritual encumbrance” wrote Teilhard de Chardin more than forty years ago.⁴⁶ How has much changed in the intervening period? I have recently written a short book about this whole area of *Equipping Christians at Work*.⁴⁷ It comes out of 32 years trying to live out its title as a parish priest and from a parish perspective. The themes described in it are fundamental to how we see God at work, and what we see the purpose of the church to be.

Industrial Mission

Part of the book describes the history and theology of what used to be called Industrial Mission. IM began after the last war, out of a deep awareness of the huge gap that had opened up between the church and people’s working lives, and between the church and the great mass of the English working population. The challenge for

⁴⁵ Neil MacGregor quoted by John Drury, *Painting the Word* (Yale UP, New Haven 1999) 118.

⁴⁶ *Le Milieu Divin* (1957) 65.

⁴⁷ Published by the Industrial Christian Fellowship.

IM was how to bridge that gap, how to make connections between faith and work and how to serve and influence the whole world of work, particularly its structures. As Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, better known as the famous First World War army chaplain, Woodbine Willie, used to say in the 1920s: “If our finding God in churches leads to our losing him in factories, it were better to tear down the churches, for God must hate the sight of them.”

My own convictions have been shaped by three key conversations:

1. Making connections between faith and work

When I went to selection conference in my early 20s, with a view to being ordained, the selectors suggested gaining pastoral experience in the north of England. I spent the next two summers in Stockton on Tees in a new area parish. There I met Bill Wright, the leader of Teeside Industrial Mission.

Being with Bill as he talked to groups of apprentices, managers and a whole variety of people employed at ICI’s plant at Billingham, I saw someone drawing people out, asking questions, making connections between faith and work. Watching Bill, I began to realise that one of the key jobs of a parish priest was to help people make connections between their faith and their work, to equip people for their working lives in whatever way was possible.

2. Finding God at work

I was in South India where I had gone on a World Council of Churches Scholarship to complete my ministerial training. As part of that year, and taking up an interest that had first been aroused by Bill Wright and the Teeside Industrial Mission, I wrote a book on trade union leadership in Bangalore, the city where I was studying. I interviewed twelve of the key trade union leaders in the city. Most of them were Communists trained in Moscow.

But one of the trade union leaders was a deeply committed Christian, Alexander Devasunder. Two sentences from our interview stood out: “Do encourage people to see their working lives as a key focus for their discipleship, for that is where their faith will be tested and developed and where Christ will be found and followed”. And later on: “It was his faith in Christ as his model that kept him going. Christ was there in every situation at work, and so Alex was there in every situation to reconcile people to each

other. These situations were his altar, where he could worship and sacrifice, where reconciliation can and does take place... yet it was communism that had dignified the role and existence of the worker, for this was where Christianity had failed.”

I came back from India and went in 1969 as a curate to the team ministry in Poplar in East London. I joined the Labour Party, and have remained a member ever since.

Equipping Christians from the parish

One Sunday morning, we were clearing up after the main Eucharist, and the head server said to me: “You know, Julian, when I retire I want to do more church work.” George’s day job was as convenor shop steward of the Ford plant in Dagenham, one of the key trade union jobs in the British car industry at that time. I realised that George saw his church work as what he did on Sundays. And from then I decided that I would do all I could to help George and others like him to see that, to use Alex Devasunder’s words again: “It was their working lives that were a key focus for their discipleship. And it was there that faith would be tested and developed and where Christ could be found and followed.”

So I started my first ‘Christians at Work’ group, and brought together some of the working men in the parish - it was all men then. Interestingly most of the people who joined the group were those who already had some trade union experience. In my book I suggest a number of possible ways to equip Christians at Work (by which I mean paid employment) that can be developed from a parish base⁴⁸. Over the years I have come to five main conclusions.

1. The theology of our faith

The first is about how we do theology, how we think about our faith, where we start. Archbishop Michael Ramsey said of Industrial Mission: “It is a theological adventure it is doing theology in the working areas of people’s lives. It uses the ‘inductive’ approach to theology in contrast to the ‘kerugmatik’ or ‘deductive’ approach, which is a proclamation of the Gospel using traditional words and thought forms. The inductive method starts from the world and from experience, and works back to propositions about God, the world and Christ. There is nothing

⁴⁸ See *Ministry Today*, 15 (Spring 1999)

new about inductive theology, but without it we perish today ... Christian theology has become stale, and there is a divine call to intellectual spring cleaning... We get a foretaste of the inductive method in the parables of Jesus (and) in the Gospel of John where he begins with words and concepts recognised in the Gentile world, and works on them, and then points to Jesus as the fulfilment of them.”

It is significant that the key Church of England reports in this area over the last 15 years (*Faith in the City*, *Faith in the Countryside*, and *Unemployment and the Future of Work*) have all used the inductive/contextual method, starting from where people are, what the situation is and reflecting on where the ‘grip’ of the situation and the ‘grip’ of the Gospel interrelate with each other, inform one another, speak to each other. Inductive, contextual theology is a vital tool for our ethical reflection.

Reflecting on the ethics of work

Over the years people have often said to me, “Julian, you know it’s not easy being a Christian at work.” If I know them well enough, I have usually responded with a question: “Is it easier to be a Christian at home or at work?” After a pause they smile and reply, “I guess it’s more difficult at home, there’s no escape there, they know me too well.” But the point people are making is that at work there are very few easy decisions, and some incredibly complex ones. People’s assumption is that the Christian faith, and perhaps the church, and almost certainly the clergy don’t really understand the complexity and tension that people face at work (I am not trying to suggest that home life is a tension free zone, but the issues are of a different order).

And here we come to the best bishop’s letter I can remember receiving. Peter Hall, then Bishop of Woolwich, wrote in March 1993: “Religious people are peculiarly unwilling to recognize that most choices are between greater or lesser evils. Because we believe in goodness and love as absolute values, we imagine that we can make choices in which such absolutes are open to us. They rarely are. They never worked for Jesus, who was born into a world to live out fully God’s love for mankind. Even by being born, it led to other children in Bethlehem being slaughtered. His mission hurt his own family - for his mother, it was like ‘a sharp sword’. If our Lord found that whatever course he chose was going to hurt somebody, how can we, his followers expect to be free from

such consequences? The people with whom we need to share our faith certainly know they cannot avoid it. They feel condemned by a faith which suggests they can make choices untinged by evil. They know their hands are dirty and will go on being so. They need a Gospel that unflinchingly recognises that.”

What we have done is to imagine that there is some Platonic ideal of right and wrong that we as Christians, the ‘Guardian class’ in Platonic terms, have access to. This, as Peter Hall suggests, has had serious long term repercussions.

3.The inevitability of compromise

Simon Phipps, the former Bishop of Lincoln, said when he was the industrial chaplain in the Coventry Diocese: “Christians often think compromise is a dirty word. It can be but it needn’t be ... To accept a compromise as final, and the ‘best of a bad job’ is not Christian. To accept a compromise while continuing to analyse and act on the various factors surrounding the problem is what Christians are bound to do.”

To put it another way: compromise is ethically static. Compromise plus questioning is ethically dynamic and offers the continuing possibility of arriving at a win/win conclusion where everyone has something of their needs met.

4.Decisions, decisions!

There is a great deal of good material about Christians at Work. Some of the best is to be found in *Faith in Business* (the journal of the Ridley Hall Foundation and the Industrial Christian Fellowship, Ridley Hall, Cambridge). But good as all this material is, most of the key questions and dilemmas that people face at work begin where the written material ends. That is why I have always encouraged parishes and congregations to form ‘Christians at Work’ groups where some of these issues can be teased out.

Christians at Work groups

In Richmond for 9 years now, and in my previous parish for 7 years, our ‘Christians at Work’ group has met fortnightly during term time from 9.15 to 10.15am. After a cup of coffee together and a brief prayer the discussion starts. We always finish punctually at 10.15. Different people introduce a topic of their choice for about ten minutes, and then we spend the rest of the hour working on the issues raised.

This term we have listened to one person who was acting head of a county's children's services for 6 months (while her boss had treatment for cancer), with a budget of £35m and cuts to make. Another member of the group spoke about the challenge of a major public takeover and the dilemmas involved. Someone else spoke about the latest developments in the New Deal with which they are involved. People in the group share their concerns and sometimes we invite someone in the parish to speak who is going through a particularly challenging time.

We have about 35 people on our mailing list and an average attendance of 11. We have an annual morning conference where we invite an outsider to speak on a contemporary topic - this year the director of 'Tomorrow's Company' led our morning workshop. The group's task is: Making Connections - Sharing the Pressures - Encouraging a Vision.

It has four aims:

- * To develop an informed Christian mind;
- * To clarify issues for ourselves and others;
- * To create a moral checklist;
- * To help people live with impossible situations.

It is worth saying on this last point that one member of our group used to work for the Child Support Agency. One of his tasks was to ring up the single parents on a Sunday morning at 8 a.m. to check if they were cohabiting. He found this invidious - what should he do? The group advised him to leave the job. I was disappointed we didn't really tackle the question about changing the system.

We always start with people's experience, but there are models we can use to tease out the issues. Here are five key questions we use to focus our thinking:

1. What is the situation, the story?
2. What are the issues raised?
3. What are the structures involved which create/address the issues?
4. What are the insights of Scripture and tradition and any other insights that may be relevant?
5. How can all this be applied to the original situation?

One recent example of the group reflecting on issues raised by a speaker was when the founder of a small firm employing about 30 people came to describe his dilemmas. They have a network of

suppliers in other parts of the world. The key issues involved were competition practices, controlling costs, personal issues with employees, profit sharing schemes. The challenges were local, national and international. As he said afterwards: “Where else could you get such an informed discussion of all the issues where people are genuinely concerned to clarify the issues rather than just make judgements?”

Not long ago, someone came to talk about the dilemmas she faced in whistle blowing in a highly respected organization. A group member spoke movingly about how he faced unemployment with his personal shield, a process of analysing the four quarters of his life into: personal organization, job seeking, grasp on normality, and ‘painting the pier’ jobs that have to be done to maintain some sense of achievement. Nine months later he shared with the group what he felt like starting a new job, under the heading: “What to Wear for Work?”

The dreaded R-word - Redundancy!

When people shared their experiences of being made redundant, the men had more experience of making people redundant and the women of being made redundant. One of the most important members of the group is someone who left school without any qualifications and now in her 40s is doing her GCSEs one by one. She reminds us from time to time of what it can feel like to be on the receiving end of an organization.

Particular sectors and special pressures

Many people, either for reasons of time or seniority, find this forum difficult, so we have occasional evening meetings when they talk about their work - a newspaper editor, a high court judge and chair of the Law Commission, a scientist at the forefront of the cloning research, the publisher of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, a newly created life peer, the civil servant who set up the national lottery in 9 months. In this way we affirm people in their pressured jobs and help to tease out some of the issues they face.

Particular jobs or sectors have their special pressures. We have a teachers’ and governors’ group, and a solicitors group. In my last parish, we had a group for all those involved in the health service. These are all ways in which we seek to support and equip people for their daily lives.

A recent publicity leaflet for 'Faith and Work' groups in another diocese states as its aim: "to help adult lay Christians discover how God is present in the world of daily work, how to live out their vocation as Christians dispersed through the world of work and how to widen the vision of the local church gathered for worship so that it sees the whole world as God's world." Our groups seek to do this by linking head and heart, faith and work, work and worship, by 'minding the gap', by making connections.

When the going gets tough, what difference does being a Christian make?

Some key issues emerge again and again:

- * conflict and how to handle it;
- * the effect of structures and how can they be changed, if at all;
- * what differences does it make being a Christian in any given situation?

This touches on a theme we have often discussed - spirituality. We have been helped by members sharing their faith, how much the communion service means to them, but particularly by the disciplines that people use - one member visits a city church for a quiet time in the middle of the day. Another says matins and evensong on the train daily. A group member who works with the homeless and is a contemplative at heart, has talked about prayer 'in the midst of life'. When I was honorary chaplain of Abbey National in Milton Keynes, they had a 'Caring for Self' programme, in which one suggestion was "Find a hermit spot and use it daily".

My continuing concern has been: "Making Connections - Sharing the Pressures - Encouraging a Vision". As Alexander Devasunder said, "Encourage people to see their working lives as a key focus for their discipleship, for that is where their faith is tested and developed and where Christ is to be found and followed."

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