

Eve of St Benedict – Tarago & Collector (“Work and Vocation”)

A sermon by Tom Frame (10/07/16)

Let me begin with a big question that assumes you believe in God. Why were we created? What did God have in mind? Were we given life to enjoy or to endure? If you listen to many people describe their occupation or employment, work is a punishment more than a pleasure. And yet, it is not meant to be this way. The notion of God calling us in our daily life helps us focus on the crucial concept of vocation – a matter of great concern to the person who helped to bring a sense of unity to Europe 1500 years ago and whose Feast Day is tomorrow: St Benedict. He was concerned with finding our true purpose on earth and to pursuing it in our daily life as an offering to God. But modern life has tended to separate, if not alienate, what we call work from our vocation, or our calling, to be God’s people in every facet of our living. So what we do on Sunday in church is considered sacred but what we might do on the paddock on a Wednesday is profane. One is important to God and the other is not. St Benedict would challenge this duality – as I want to explain.

To understand the historic Christian attitude to what we call ‘work’, we must go back to the Reformation and the person of the German theologian Martin Luther (1483 to 1526). As a young man Luther became an Augustinian monk and pursued a life committed to the belief that the only way of living acceptably before God was to surpass worldly morality through a form of highly disciplined spirituality. He thought of routine activity, such as cooking eating, sleeping, cleaning, as a thing of the flesh – unimportant and morally neutral - although it might have been ‘willed by God’. But when he grasped the doctrine of justification by faith and all its consequences in 1517, he concluded that the monastic life was quite devoid of value as a means of securing salvation. He came to believe that the monastic renunciation of the duties and responsibilities of this world was, in fact, a product of selfishness because these burdens actually fell on other people. By contrast, a calling to work in the world was, he thought, an outward expression of love. This contention he proves by the observation that the division of labour (the existence of trades and skills) forces every individual to work for others. He soon abandoned this rather naïve notion of labour, but adhered to the notion that the fulfilment of everyday worldly duties was, under all circumstances, the only way to live acceptably before God. Therefore, he argues, every legitimate calling has exactly the same worth in the sight of God. Put simply: God is no more or less pleased if you are a farmer or a stock agent.

This was a crucial outcome of the Reformation. It was a frontal assault on the widely held religious view that all worldly activity was to be devalued and even despised. Luther asserted salvation was made available to anyone as a free gift of God’s grace regardless of their occupation or walk of life. A monk was no more assured of salvation than a lay person because effecting salvation was a divine activity not a human achievement. But one’s occupation was, for Luther,

not entirely neutral. He was adamant that the Christian should not pursue material gain beyond their immediate personal need.

This was symptomatic of a lack of faith and, because wealth could only be attained at the expense of others, its accumulation was plainly reprehensible. It was for this reason that Luther condemned usury – the lending of money with interest. These are radical ideas that are certainly discomfoting.

Luther pointed out that in the Old Testament, the message is clearly that everyone should turn to the work at hand and let the godless run after worldly gain. In the New Testament, he noted 1 Corinthians 7:20: 'stay in the calling in which you were called'. Luther came to believe very strongly in Providence and worldly station: if you were born into a peasant family then you should be content to remain a peasant; if into a family of artisans, you are called to be an artisan, and so on. He was insistent: you must accept worldly things as they are ... they are ordered by God. This was partly a response to the violent and chaotic peasant uprising his other theological views had prompted in Germany in 1525. But this kind of thinking appeared to sever worldly activity from religious principles, and left Luther with practically very little to say about one's attitude towards daily work.

It was only in the theology of John Calvin and the Puritans later in the 16th century that a better and more nuanced attitude to work developed. Here we find that things like enterprise and industry, creativity and ingenuity, are commended as fit and worthy offerings to God. Thus the key Biblical text in this period became: 'whatever you do, do it for the Lord'. If you are a farmer or a stock agent, be the best farmer and stock agent that you can be; praise God by making the most of the gifts imparted to you; and, commend your faith to others as a good steward of God's grace. This mindset was much later dubbed the 'Protestant work ethic' by sociologists and has been attributed with promoting the Industrial Revolution and giving shape to modern capitalism. It is now out of favour, being accused of encouraging rampant consumerism, failing to restrain consumption for its own sake, segregating work from worship and labour from leisure, promoting the kind of competition that destroys significant relationships, and being devoid of a compassionate centre that abhors physical, emotional and spiritual weariness. In effect, it is indicted for creating an environment in which people live to work rather than work to live, and tragically not knowing the difference.

Luther was, of course, right and he was wrong. What you did might not have influenced salvation but how you did it directly affected sanctification – the means by which we are made or become holy. On one level Luther was right to attack self-absorbed monasticism but on another he neglected important teaching on work that was embedded in the Benedictine rule which was highly influential. Here a little more history might be helpful. St Benedict of Nursia lived from around 480 to 550. He was educated in Rome and appalled by the worldliness of the city withdrew to Subiaco around 500. By 529 when he moved to Monte Cassino, he had gathered a group of monks around him and devised a rule in 540 to regulate their common life. It drew heavily on the Psalms, Proverbs, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the letters of St Paul and 1 Peter. His aim was

all encompassing: in everything they did his community would live by the order and stability of the Christian Gospel. The Benedictine Rule offered three principles on the subject of work and they are each explained in the context of prayer.

They are, first, vocation – being called to what we do; stewardship – taking care of what is given; and, obedience, serving one another.

For St Benedict, *vocation* is about hearing the call of God and responding. This is the primary movement of the spiritual life and it is initiated by God. It is about discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit, laying down those things are inessential or unimportant, embracing a task because its acceptance brings one nearer to God, and finding that inner transformation occurs as a consequence of its fulfilment.

Stewardship is based on a continuing recognition that everything in creation bears the mark of God's hand, warranting our reverent attention and deserving our care and compassion. As Christians are in the world but not of it, they are encouraged to appreciate the difference between ownership and possession: that some things are given to us in trust ... we can hold them but they remain God's. Stewardship means working with God to tend and care for the world, including our own vocation, which reflects a unity of purpose.

Obedience is the means by which we can integrate freedom and service. While we have the capacity to make decisions and the ability to make choices that will enhance our happiness and reduce our pain, obedience empowers us to subvert our preferences and overcome our prejudices so that we might transcend ourselves and embrace others. If the meaning and purpose of life is found in overcoming selfishness in favour of selflessness, in deciding to be obedient to God and subject to his wisdom we choose to become servants and find a new sense of peace – wholeness, harmony and well-being. In a word - shalom. This applies whether we are in paid or unpaid employment, in the active workforce or retired. That something we do some things for money does not make them any more valuable. The notion of 'retirement', something I will address directly in a future sermon, can leave some to believe they are passengers and not participants. This is a highly corrosive attitude that our modern economy encourages and which we must condemn.

There are more modern monks inspired by St Benedict and his rule than any other saint or charter in the Christian world. Indeed, many of the later monastic communities drew on Benedict's foundations. There are also women and men who live by a monastic rule as affiliates or oblates of a monastery and seek its order and discipline in their lives.

My main point today is that these three principles of vocation, stewardship and vocation shift the focus well above whether I am a farmer or a stock agent. These are merely means to an end. But you might ask: if our work embodies vocation, stewardship and obedience, will it make a difference? Will our view of work as something spiritual make our society sacred? Perhaps. May be ... may be not. Whenever we endeavour to cooperate with God and embrace divine purposes; we

know that we are being changed from glory to glory, whether we sense it or not; and we know that the Kingdom will come, whether fully in our lifetime or not. The key text for us to consider comes from Isaiah chapter 55, verses 10 and 11:

‘For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it’.

The take home message is this: we are called to be sincerely and singularly committed to God in what we do and God will make of our work what God will – using what is productive and passing by what isn’t. In the embrace of vocation, stewardship and obedience, we will have reflected to the world the words and works of Jesus, pointed to the coming Kingdom of God, and revealed something of the freedom of living in the Spirit. St Benedict would say to us: make that your focus and your work will be lifted above mere employment. It will become a true vocation and God will be glorified.