

Sermon 13-11-2022

Work

Do day I would like us to engage with St Paul as he engages with members of a congregation he set up in Thessaloniki (to use its current name).

St. Paul addresses the members of the Thessalonian church. Something has annoyed him. Apparently there are some free loaders in Thessaloniki. Apparently some people are benefiting from charity without working for it. That accusation has come down through the ages. Even today there is a stereotype of Greeks wanting the state to care for them. Too many retiring early. Too much time spent in leisure pursuits. Too much Zorba dancing. And these modern Greeks have been told to smarten up; to work longer and harder or else they won't get any help from the EU. We need to be careful about taking such stereotypes for granted, don't we? The situation is invariably more complicated than it seems.

Paul, in a fit of righteous indignation tells the members of the congregation in Thessaloniki (probably mostly Greeks) that he would never be a free loader. I earn my keep, he says, and so should you. We should all pull our weight, says Paul. It sounds familiar doesn't it? Here are lots of Paul's in our society too. There's a bit of Paul in each one of us. We listen to Paul (as we should). We nod wisely. We want to support those that cannot support themselves, but we draw the line when we become aware that some people are taking advantage of our good will

Discussion...

Close to home, it's a bit like the problem we have here with the *Little Free Pantry*. Some people may be taking stuff without deserving it. We are not sure, but we have our suspicions — and we are uncomfortable.

We need a bit more mutual responsibility. We need a bit more "give" with the "take". We reckon Paul is on the ball.

For us a big issue is, can we police charity. For Paul the issue was whether a day's feed should be earned. We are not sure why Paul delivered this outburst in his context. He doesn't go into detail. He is writing to people he knows well, and who know him too. He can assume that they know who he is talking about. There is no reason to think that Paul is talking to us, 2000 years down the line. We do know, however, that these words of his have had far-reaching ramifications over those 2000 years.

One of the few things I remember from science classes at school was my teacher assuring us that a wonderful world was just over the horizon, in which machines would become our slaves and we would be freed from drudgery; that we could live lives of leisure and be able to devote ourselves to creativity. That we would, in other words, live without working. We would sit back, put up our feet and relax — and be waited on hand and foot. This was in the mid-fifties? Do you remember the fifties?

Little did we suspect what really lay ahead - that machines and devices would certainly make aspects of our lives easier, but they would also change our relationship towards machines and each other. Work, which for Paul was key to regulated social relationships, has been degraded for us in ways Paul could never imagine. And could Paul, or anyone for that matter, ever imagine the close and dependent relationship we would develop with our machine slaves.

Courtesy of those beloved slaves, much work has been broken down into fragmented and meaningless tasks. Creative work has become the province of an elite. Very few of us have the luxury of being proud of our work. Very few of us can stand back and say "Look! I made that!" Perhaps that partly explains

the current fascination with cooking. Perhaps cooking is one of the last bastions of craftsmanship — except of course we then pop a ready-meal in the microwave.

How do we, or should we, respond to this. Social scientists tell us we are losing our agency. The extent of our control is shrinking to the local and the domestic. But we struggle to maintain pride in the domestic. For many the domestic sphere is something we shoehorn between the demands of work. Work from home seems like a form of liberation; it will give us more time with the kids. But for many that is a pipe-dream. The laptop and the phone are insistent. And I need to give the boss ample evidence that I am being productive.

In recent times there has been a growing interest in the possibility of a Universal Wage. That is to say, the possibility of giving everyone a standard wage — a bit like a pension, but for everyone. This wage would ensure a reasonable living for all. Would that mean the end of poverty? Would that mean the end of charity? Some people think so. People would still be free to earn additional money, but they would not need to.

Of course some people would waste their money - but the Pauls of this world could no longer accuse any of us as being free-loaders. The drudgery of work would be handed over largely to our machines and gadgets. We, as slave-owners would simply call the shots, issue instruction, decide on what a beautiful world of leisure would look like. We would no longer be required to be productive. Our children could do arts degrees without being penalised. In our information-rich world our choice to study ancient Etruscan, or simply sit and ponder on the meaning of life would be valued as much as quantum mechanics.

Is this utopia or is it hell? It has been tried out, but not continued. There have been economic objections, of course. Where is the money to come from? From the machines, of course. And there are moral objections too. We have been trained to see a moral link between work and meaning. For many of us work gives our lives meaning. And some say that a life that is not productive is not a life worth living.

Paul's diatribe against free-loaders has been hugely influential. For most of us it has become patently self-evident that there are no free lunches. Others observe what is happening in the world of work and see only looming disaster.

So what business of the church is the world of work. Clearly Paul made it his business to sort out the Thessalonian church. And Paul's words were used to justify the Poor Laws. And later the church was involved with the establishment of the Welfare State. And the Welfare State was based on a code of mutual responsibility wherein one gets support in return for a bit of effort - allowing that those who can't work don't need to. Now a new age is creeping up on us. The link between work and the moral code is being undermined. A new code required!

And who will develop that code. Will the church take on the role of helping us to behave well in this new age? Will we be able to value each other without mentioning work. Can the church lead the way in an age where creativity is not tied to one's work but is tied to one's understanding of the relationship we have to creation. Will we, at last become a creative, joyful church of people defined, not by our work, or our possessions, or our class, but by our joy in each other. And will the church be a new factory — a new home of meaning, and a powerhouse of love.

What is sure, if we don't apply ourselves to this "new creation", we may lose our chance to fashion a future — a new heaven and a new earth.

And, of course, if the runaway climate and the dreaded virus don't get us first, or so mould our future that Paul, the Church, our good will, our hope and charity become irrelevant!