

Two views of work

We might wonder what on earth was going on in the church that the apostle Paul had helped to found in the ancient Macedonian city of Thessalonica. One of the blessings of reading through the letters sent to early Christian churches that make up the bulk of the New Testament is that you realise there never was a perfect church. Even in the earliest days church life was fraught with problems and if it hadn't been we wouldn't have had a New Testament at all because most of the letters found in it concern problems these churches were embroiled in.

So last week we heard that there were people in the church at Thessalonica who were preoccupied with the end of the world, thinking that the last days were now upon them. This week, as we turn to chapter 3 of the letter, we find that there seem to have been problems of discipline in the church. There seems to have been an issue of some people not working, not pulling their weight, not contributing adequately to the life of the community. And in contrast to what sounds like clear examples of freeloading Paul refers to his and his companions own example when they came to Thessalonica: 'we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you.' In other words Paul and his companions had gone out of their way to avoid any possible accusation that they were living at others' expense. They had earned their keep. And Paul makes his feelings very clear by stating, 'anyone unwilling to work should not eat!' This, clearly, is Paul the disciplinarian, making sure that the church is no soft touch.

Now, it has to be said that we do not know exactly what was going on in Thessalonica and why some people were evidently not working. Was it linked to the conviction that the world was about to end? Why bother with work if the end is nigh? And there are other theories about what was going on: it seems in fact that the issue was not about laziness but about disorder – not that some people were idle but that people were somehow undermining the order and stability of the community: Paul describes them as busybodies, actively disrupting the common good and wellbeing of the church. And for any community to flourish there have to be common practices to which all are committed and for which all are accountable, otherwise there is no bonding and no union. Hence Paul's somewhat disciplinarian tone: 'no work – no food!'

Well, whatever was going on in Thessalonica, this passage is an invitation this morning to think about work, and productivity, and responsibility – all very contentious topics in the modern world. In the UK at present, embroiled as it is in a General Election campaign, unemployment figures will be bandied about and policies concerning benefits will be traded and parties will be vying to show that they are fair and yet firm, that the vulnerable will be protected while the 'scroungers' will not be. And I want to suggest to you that there might be two ways to look at work: two views, one from above, looking down; and one from a different perspective - dare I say it? - from a Biblical perspective.

And my starting point is to say that Paul's phrase, 'Anyone unwilling to work should not eat!' gives me the creeps. Perhaps it shouldn't. Perhaps in Paul's day it might have been a perfectly right and necessary thing to say given whatever was going on in the church at Thessalonica. And it may be a perfectly reasonable thing to say today – a genuine concern that while some work hard, perhaps with long hours, others opt out, fail to contribute to the common good and deny their civic duty. Yet I cannot help but be aware of how easily the unemployed can be disparaged and even demonised. For example, there is a term that has become very common currency in the UK, the phrase 'hard working families'. Politicians trot this one out at every opportunity, usually justifying their own policies or disparaging their opponents', and seeking to curry favour with so-called ordinary people who work hard and play their part and are entitled to fairness. But the phrase 'hard working families' immediately exposes families who, for whatever reason, are not hard working. Again, in an infamous speech in the 2012 British General election the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, justifying his parties' economic policies, included this rhetorical question which I quote: 'Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at

the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?’ That sort of comment helps to create a climate of resentment and suspicion towards the unemployed. And such attitudes feed into a distinction that is often made between ‘the deserving’ and ‘the undeserving’ poor. The deserving poor are of course those who are poor through no fault of their own, the victims of forces beyond their control, while the undeserving poor are those who have made wrong choices and decisions: their poverty is their own fault. As if it were ever so simple! And that leads on to the distinction made between the deserving and the undeserving immigrant. Already in the UK election I am tired of hearing politicians saying that the immigrants we want are ‘the brightest and best’ – people who will contribute to our economy: forgetting of course that our importing of the brightest and best is draining other countries of their brightest and best, countries whose need is far greater than ours. And of course ‘undeserving immigrants’ are so-called ‘economic immigrants’, people coming not out of desperation but simply out of the desire to better themselves, to benefit economically – and we conveniently forget that these are often people coming to claim a share of the wealth that was taken from their countries by successive empires in the past.

So, ‘Anyone unwilling to work should not eat’, says Paul. And yes, of course that needs to be said if a society is to foster responsibility and initiative, just as it doubtless needed to be said to a church community in Thessalonica. But how easily it feeds into a narrative about the feckless poor, the scroungers, the idle poor who are parasites. How easily it results in procedures that force the disabled into the indignity of having to prove that they cannot work in order to grudgingly receive benefits. How easily it contributes to a determination that no-one should ever get a free lunch or a free ride. This is the view that ends up looking down on the unemployed and the desperate.

Well, what about a biblical view of work? What a huge topic! We might begin in the Book of Genesis where human kind are created and commanded to till the earth and to act as stewards of nature, and so work is part of our vocation as humans. Indeed we might argue that the capacity for work is part of what it means to be made in the image of God: God works, God makes, God creates, and so do we. So work is dignifying and should be fulfilling and essential to our flourishing as human beings. But the Bible would also suggest that work in a fallen world is cursed: we are estranged from the soil we are called to till, and Karl Marx argued that we are alienated and estranged from the fruit of our labours, and that work can therefore also be soul-destroying and wearing and oppressive, and we can be trapped in degrading and humiliating jobs which are anything but dignified and fulfilling. And, of course, work can be unjustly rewarded – sometimes with far too little pay and sometimes with far too much. And our reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning gives us a beautiful picture of God’s new creation where people build houses and live in them and plant vineyards and eat their fruit: in other words where people receive just reward for their labours.

The biggest distortion, however, of work from the biblical point of view is that it all too easily takes over our lives. Our identity is absorbed into the work we do – and this is especially the temptation of those who have good, satisfying, fulfilling jobs. Work becomes obsessive. It becomes an idol: the key to who we are. And that leads to another biblical motif: we so easily end up justifying ourselves, justifying our lives by our work. It is our work that gives us meaning, gives us purpose, gives us our bearings: justifying and validating our existence. And if the sins of idleness and of shirking our responsibility to work are often associated with those on the underside of society, the poor, there is also the sin of the powerful - of being consumed by work and effectively making it their God. And while we are quick to point out the sins of the work-shy, we are more tolerant of the idolatry of the well-to-do consumed by their work. We see it all around us: the neglect of ourselves and of our families – the excessive hours spent at work, the ever-present mobile phone at the dinner table, the obsessive texting and checking for messages.

Well, the Bible gives us one, powerful antidote to this tyranny of work. It’s called the sabbath, the sabbath rest. And it begins with God who labours for six days and then rests, refusing to find his identity and his fulfilment in his creation. And the command of the sabbath emerges from the experience of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt who knew only work, and brick production, and a Pharaoh whose life and whose nation’s life ran on endless production and consumption, consumption and production... And sabbath says stop! And Pharaoh’s Egypt is where we live today, and there is a

word here we need to hear to counter the tyranny of work. And for the next few sessions in our fortnightly Bible study we are going to be taking the theme of Sabbath as Resistance: the Bible's antidote to the sheer craziness of our times.

'Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.' So says Paul, no doubt for good reason. But as Christians we recognise the ambiguity of work: its capacity to dignify and fulfil us, but also its capacity to destroy us. We give thanks for the gift of good and satisfying work but recognise too those who for whatever reason cannot work. We recognise the danger of shunning it but also the danger of over-pre-occupation with it. And we find our identity in the God who commands us to rest from it – just as he does. Amen.

Gracious and holy God,
 you awaken us to a new day.
 You awaken us to a day of gift
 and of blessing and of opportunity.
 You awaken us to this, the Lord's Day,
 when we recall a day when a tomb was found empty
 and a new world began.
 This is the day that the Lord has made,
 let us rejoice and be glad in it.
 And you have given us the rhythms of the seasons:
 winter and spring, summer and autumn,
 and we praise you for the beauty of this season –
 when leaves turn and fall and decay is all around –
 emitting such beauty and splendour.
 And you have given us the rhythms of days:
 day and night and work and rest.
 forgive us, God, that we are anxious people,
 forever striving, forever stressed,
 unable too rest in you and in your love.
 O God come to us now, we pray, in forgiveness
 and give us rest for our weary souls.
 Help us to know that we are accepted and embraced,
 with nothing to prove, no need to justify ourselves:
 just loved and graced by you.

And hear us now as we pray in the words our Saviour,
 Jesus Christ taught us, saying....