

Lent 5: Sunday 2 April 2017

Ezek 37: 1-14; Ps 130; Rom 8: 6-11; Jn 11: 1-45

We come to the final in this Lenten series about work in our contemporary society, and we have the skills clusters of artisans and designers still to consider. These are the people who are skilled with their hands and minds: they include plumbers, musicians, artists, electricians, carpenters, bricklayers, sportsmen and sportswomen, and all who work with their hands as 'amateurs', that is all who, as the novelist Sara Maitland reminds us, do some form of creative activity simply for the love of doing it.

Let me start by reminding you of how these of these groups can be distinguished from one another:

The Artisans' skills cluster involves jobs that require 'skill in manual tasks related to construction, production, maintenance or technical customer service'.

The Designers' skills cluster are connected with jobs that involve 'skills and knowledge of science, mathematics and design to construct or engineer products or buildings'. These are the people who plan, from pattern makers to civil engineers, and determine what is needed for particular projects. And there's at least some overlap with the domain of the 'coders', the manipulators of digital information, who we were thinking of last week.

I hope it's not too much of a stretch, but I want to relate Martha to the artisan's group, and Mary to the designers. Martha is clearly the activist of the two – she gets things done, and gets annoyed when people don't pitch in to help. She probably thinks they're getting above themselves, people like her sister Mary. As for Mary, it's harder to say much about her, except that we know from another story about her, in Luke's Gospel (10: 38-42), that she's more likely a thinker. She sits and listens, perhaps adding her own penny's worth to the conversation – something that really annoys her sister, who's clearly taken on board the prevailing cultural assumption that a woman's place is in the kitchen. One thing they have in common, though, in today's story: they both berate Jesus for having taken his time in getting there. After all, there's been a crisis, and in both their opinions, Jesus had a responsibility. His job is to be a healer, and he could have been a bit more prompt at getting his job done – to heal their brother Lazarus. 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died', says Martha, and later, Mary independently repeats this sentiment (11:21 and 32). But he's taken his time. Maybe he's concerned to dispel the idea that healing is his job; the healings are important, but – even in a life or death situation like this one – healing is subordinate to the main game, which is to demonstrate something of God's Kingdom to the disciples: 'For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe' (11: 15). This is why in John's Gospel the healings and other miracles are called 'signs'. Jesus thus puts work, even good work, firmly in its place: it is subordinate to life; and Jesus' works are designed not as ends in themselves, but as demonstrations of something far bigger: the Kingdom of God. That in itself is something we can usefully hold before us as we go to work on Monday morning.

Nowadays this delay on Jesus' part might be called 'life – work balance'. But as far

as the two sisters are concerned, it's something approaching criminal negligence on the part of Jesus. I expect care, I expect action – now! And isn't this the expectations we very often place on artisans? The water's gone off, or the drains are blocked – and no, I can't wait two hours. I need a plumber - now!

Jesus' delay in going to Bethany serves to place a question mark, too, against our tendency, especially for blokes, I have to say, to identify ourselves by what we do. When you meet someone for the first time, how long does it take to asking or being asked: so what do you do?

I once had the experience –when I was working in a country parish, long before the days of mobile phones, of having my VW break down late in the afternoon on a lonely country road. I hitched a ride with the next passing car, but of course, almost immediately had to admit to what I did for a living, and paid for my lift to the next township by having to listen to a forty-minute tirade on all the things wrong with religion. It's a bit of an occupational hazard. Jesus is telling us here that our work is not the be all and end all of who we are. Maybe that's what Paul is getting at too, in the Romans reading, when he talks about the mind set on the flesh, as being a form of death. Our daily work, after all, is about earning an income: we need to do it because of, quite literally, the needs of the flesh, to survive. It's important, but real life – and our real work as Christians in the world, is something bigger and grander.

So we come to a death, in the Gospel, and the possibility of life. What I have several times in this series called 'alienated labour' is the work that might keep us alive, give us an income, but fails to give us life itself, the abundant life that Jesus holds out to us. It doesn't even express our innermost yearnings, it is work whose purpose is purely functional. For many people, that is the primary experience of work – as purely functional, as a means to an end; and for all of us, work is sometimes like that. Why else would we look forward to weekends? Unless of course we make the mistake of defining ourselves solely by our work, so that our work becomes an end in itself. And that can be even worse. It's not for nothing that we were given the Sabbath, as a limit, and a conditionality, on everything to do with our working lives.

In both the Ezekiel reading and today's Gospel we have life being breathed, called and dragged out of death. In Ezekiel, the breath of life is invoked - to breathe life into the dry bones. When the dead bones come clattering together, but still without the breath of life, the prophet is told: 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God, Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live' (37: 9). And the breath *does* come into the dead dry bones, so that they live. In the Gospel, Jesus stands and calls to Lazarus in a loud voice, we're told, and commands him: 'Lazarus, Come out!' (11: 43) And Lazarus *does* come out, alive.

What we've been trying to do in this series, is to breathe life into our work life, to see it not simply as a functional thing, but neither as a sole source of fulfilment. Rather, I'd like you to see your ordinary work, whatever it may be, and either past, if you're retired, or else present and into the future, as your personal point for representing God's mission in our world. We've considered several different clusters of jobs based on the clusters of skills in which school leavers are advised to place themselves

when considering a first job or career path. The advice to school leavers is about how to position themselves advantageously for work. We have taken this further by asking the additional (but ultimately more fundamental) question that I proposed in the first of this Lenten series: How can our faith be expressed through the various skills clusters? How can we view our ordinary work as the interface between our faith life and our work life? How might our working lives become places in which we represent Christ, and thus bring Christ's presence into our everyday world? These are the questions we have explored. The point now is to use our daily work to make Christ present, in our presence to those around us. This is not necessarily a matter of *talking* about Christ or the church or the Kingdom of God, except perhaps on those relatively rare occasions when it seems appropriate to do so, but a matter of – while being not hiding our Christian identity – a matter of *being*; of being the people we most truly and authentically are.

This is the task to which each of us is called.