

Lent 1: Sunday 5 March 2017

Gen 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7; Ps 32: Rom 5: 12-21; Mt 4: 1-11.

I was persuaded of couple of things recently: One was to give a series of sermons this Lent on faith and work, to see our ordinary daily work as integral parts of God's mission in the world. More on this later. The other was to see a German language film that was running

at the Nova in Carlton.¹ Well I'd read the review of this film and knew it was quite a long film, and it was described as a comedy. This gave me a certain level of disquiet, as I've seen my fair share of German-language films that have left me thinking comedy wasn't quite the strong-point of German cinema. The first scene opens with the postman ringing a doorbell, and eventually its answered by a rather dishevelled looking middle-age man, who, when he's asked to sign for a parcel, looks at it and says, 'It's for my brother – I'll just go and wake him up. He's staying with me. He's just out of prison - for sending explosive through the post. But don't worry,' he says disappearing into the house, leaving the postman holding the parcel but now looking distinctly nervous, 'don't worry, he's also very good at defusing letter-bombs'.

Well, it was funny – but I did find myself thinking: where exactly are we going with this, for the next two and a half hours? In fact the film very quickly becomes very serious. It's about a father - daughter relationship, in which the dishevelled father is a practical joker, and his daughter Ines, a business consultant, is someone who lives for her work. She's clearly very good at her job, but she has to put her conscience on hold to do it. She is locked into a work situation that a certain 19th century philosopher (also German) called the alienated condition of labour. Her work gets in the way of her life – it constrains her, and it's not life-giving or life-affirming for her. In the end her father's initially embarrassing humour helps push her towards her own self-discovery, enabling Ines to break out of her alienated work situation. But that's the last spoiler to the film I'm prepared to give away.

Our Old Testament reading today also offers us a very clear picture of alienated labour, that is, work that gets in the way of life. At the start of Genesis chapter 2, we are given a picture of God placing Adam in the garden, with the instruction, or perhaps better, the invitation, 'to till it and keep it'. Today we might say, to use and enjoy what it – 'it' being the world as a whole - has to offer, and also to conserve it and look after it. By the end of today's reading, after the primeval temptation, we have a deep alienation setting in, between woman and man, between God and human beings, and between human beings and the earth. This is the original alienation, and Hebrew authors of these stories describe very well how it touches the world of work. It still touches us, as we tend so easily to privatise our relationship with God, and isolate it to Sunday morning. The rest of the week is the domain of 'tilling and keeping' the world around us – but very often in ways that don't entirely satisfy us, that get in the way of what we might consider real life. It may even become a substitute for real life, in ways that might feel life-giving. Our occupations can give us a sense of personal worth, but this is not quite Martin Luther's call for us to consider our daily work as an expression of our lives in Christ. I don't think he meant we should use it as a means to convert our heathen colleagues; he meant, I

¹ Toni Erdmann. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4048272/> (accessed 4/3/2017).

think, that we should live Christlike lives in and through our ordinary, secular, daily work, and approach it as our 'profession' with just as much seriousness and commitment as a mediaeval monk approached his monastic profession, something Luther knew a fair bit about from personal experience.

So how might we begin to see our work in this light? That's going to be the theme not only today but over the next five Sundays of Lent. Another way of putting this would be in connection with today's gospel, the temptations of Christ, which we hear about every year on the first Sunday of Lent. And every year I'm sure that, one way or another, I've spoken about the significance of those temptations. This Lent I want to speak about *our* temptations, our almost unavoidable temptation, given the alienation of work, to privatise our faith and lock it up for Sunday mornings alone, our temptation *not* to see our daily work activities as service to the one who has called us to follow him, who was a worker and whose disciples were workers.

Now you might ask: can this topic bear five Sundays of exploration? I think it can, if we consider different forms of work – or better, different clusters of work. For this I don't mean jobs in the traditional sense. Instead I want to follow the argument made in a recent discussion paper,² that young people considering their futures should not be thinking in terms of training for a particular job or occupation, but prepare themselves through clusters of skills that can be applied to a range of jobs: 'When a person trains or works in one job, they acquire skills for 13 other jobs'. And then there are connections between the clusters. The discussion paper is based on surveys of job advertisements that show the sorts of training required and the sorts of skills commonly requested by employers. This doesn't even begin to take into account the increasing number of young people who nowadays choose various forms of self-employment. Nor voluntary work, especially by retired people. The writers distinguish seven clusters of skills, and ask themselves which clusters hold the strongest future prospects for offering employment. A very useful question to ask if you're advising someone about to leave school and train to enter the job market. I'll be asking an additional (but ultimately more fundamental) question: how can our faith be expressed through the various skills clusters? How can these various skills clusters become points of participation in God's mission in the world?

So I'm going to finish by telling you what these seven skills clusters are, in no particular order because they are all important in a functioning society – except that this is the order I want to consider them in, for reasons that I hope will become clear in the coming weeks:

First: The Informers, with skills that involve professionals providing information, education or business services. This covers a range of skills from teaching to journalism to supporting other sorts of work.

Second: The Carers – this is fairly self-explanatory: skills that 'seek to improve the

² The New Work Mindset: 7 new job clusters to help young people navigate the new work order (Foundation for Young Australians, 2016), at <https://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/The-New-Work-Mindset.pdf> (Accessed 11/2/2017)

mental or physical health or well-being of others'. These are the people whose services we all need when we're very young or very old, and often in between as well.

Third: The Coordinators. This is a skills set that involves 'repetitive administrative and behind-the-scenes process or service tasks'. These are the people who keep us all honest by keeping records of decisions made.

Fourth: The Generators, especially of ideas, whose jobs require 'a high level of interpersonal interaction'. These are the people who generate ideas, and convey them through personal contact with others.

Fifth: The Technologists, who need 'skilled understanding and manipulation of digital technology'. This is a new cluster of skills, involving keeping abreast of the rapidly changing scene of the digital revolution.

Sixth: The Artisans, involving types of 'skill in manual tasks related to construction, production, maintenance or technical customer service'. These are the people who work with their hands: factory workers, plumbers, artists, and builders of all varieties.

Seventh: The Designers, involving '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.

These clusters overlap to quite an extent, so it may be hard to know where to locate a particular job or skill set: where do we place top athletes, for example? But note that they're about clusters of skills, not particular jobs or career paths. And this, arguably, is the shape of employment in the future. But are these clusters of skills amenable to expressing of our Christian faith, and God's mission in the world? I think so, and if I didn't I wouldn't have bothered you with all this rather technical stuff about them.

We know work is alienated, that it very often doesn't seem to give life but rather drains life, or even buffers us from really living in the way we deep down feel we should be living. Very often we think of our working lives in purely functional terms – they earn us a living, and even if they can give us a sense of self-worth, as they often do, they may still seem to have very little to do with our calling to live as ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5: 20). But if these skills clusters offer a summary of all the types of work out there in our contemporary (and more importantly, future) society – and I think they're as good as any other list of possibilities, and if we can find the key to expressing our faith in each of these clusters (and I think we can), - then we will have gone some way to facing up to our own temptations, either (on the one hand) to make our work the idolatrous centre of our lives to which we tend to sacrifice all our life-giving relationships, or (on the other) to treat these as 'just our job' which may be quite at odds with what we feel we should be doing with our lives. And for those of you who are retired, I'd say three things. First, you still have influence on younger people, whether you think you do or not, just by being yourselves. I know a 16-year old who, with very little background in the church, last

year asked to be confirmed because of her admiration for her grandmother who was simply a regular churchgoer. And second, your past working lives are redeemable, and in fact already redeemed, whether you're able to see that or not. It may be simply a matter of seeing your past working life in a new light. And finally, as I'm sure you already know, just because you're no longer paid to work doesn't mean you've stopped working. So this is the journey, the Lenten pilgrimage of the imagination, I'm inviting you to join me on, over the next four Sundays.