

Mind your language!

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"Oh, Christ!"

... and with a more or less shamefaced grin and a muttered apology, the swearer acknowledges the presence of the Christian but also expects a fairly predictable response. The Christian usually obliges, possibly as much to save her or his own embarrassment as that of the swearer. "That's OK" or "I'm merely his messenger" or "I call on him, too" or less magnanimously, "you've heard of him, then", or whatever.

It may be the only way the presence of God in the workplace is acknowledged. There are other ways in which the presence of God may be experienced but many of them remain neither recognised nor identified, even by faithful Christians. I do not refer to examples of moral or ethical behaviour. Nor do I refer to the lunchtime meetings of Christians, the faith and work groups, as honest and Christian as they may be. Neither do I refer to evangelising nor actions aimed at winning people for Christ. The aspect I want to consider is the understanding of the presence of God inherent in the work or working itself – to discuss how we might discern the signs of God in the workplace.

I go to church to find God. I think that these must be some of the saddest words in the world. This is not because I disagree that God might be found there, but because the words imply that the person has not been able to find God anywhere else. That is a tragedy.

Has no-one, no-one ever, been able to point to God's presence in the ordinary, everyday activities of life? Has it not been possible, ever, for that person to find evidence of God's spirit in the day-to-day working environment? What have we done to hide God so well? How can we - as ministers in secular employment - help Christians to make the links between what we learn of God on Sunday and the experience of God's creative, sustaining love and energising spirit Monday to Saturday?

There are many contexts in which work takes place – paid employment, itself many-faceted from the doing to the done-unto, home work, voluntary work, scholars' activities and of course work takes place even in the contexts of unemployment, retirement and leisure. I shall focus, for this exercise, on the Christian in paid employment. What *are* the experiences that Christians have of God at work? How do we help people to recognise and articulate those experiences as 'of God'? Do we use the right language?

Christians are nurtured in a faith described in religious language. This uses words such as redemption, grace, revelation or mercy. By and large, we know what they mean and the context in which we use them – the church. I don't think it is helpful to use them in the working world. Many believe, as I do, that God is incarnate in the world, active, responsive, loving, energising and reconciling. This is often recognised, and spoken of, in terms of such kingdom values as joy, compassion, justice, peace and so on. However, Sunday by Sunday we use words such as salvation, resurrection, holiness, redemption, grace. These words lie at the heart of our faith yet much more rarely can people identify the presence of God in the work place in these terms. And quite rightly – the language is not the language of the work place. However, the truths that these words convey are also there in the work place even though we so often do not seem to consider it possible or relevant. Can we not recognise it because we do not have the language to describe it?

The understanding which we so often gain of God is restricted, limited, hidebound, curtailed and made safe by the language we use to describe our experience. We inherit religious language which the church has used over centuries (and the meanings of some of them

have changed too, over that time). Instead of giving us the freedom and exhilaration and effervescent enthusiasm to describe our experience of God, our religious language wraps it up in words which we only usually use in the location (generally solemn) of church or religious meetings. These words, I venture to suggest, stifle our understanding of the dynamic power of love uniquely present in all of creation – in *all* of creation. This power of love is present in us, in our activities, all of our activities, significant and insignificant, holy and 'secular'.

There is a very useful reflection in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigation 1*¹ and, for some of us, even more usefully reproduced in *The Wittgenstein Reader*², edited by Anthony Kenny. In the chapter *Private Language and Private Experience*, Wittgenstein turns his attention to words used to refer to sensations. He poses the questions: how is the connexion between the name and the thing being named set up and how does a human being learn the names of sensations? He suggests a possible explanation – a child hurts himself and he cries. Then adults talk to him and teach him explanations and later, sentences.

He uses an example, the giving of a name to outward signs of pain, when describing how a child might be taught the use of the word toothache – not merely that the child might name his own pain but to share the understanding of 'toothache'. Wittgenstein makes another not dissimilar reflection on, for example, the comment 'how blue the sky is'. The speaker makes the assumption that the hearer has the same understanding of the word 'blue'. Both have learnt the word and the sensation described.

Of course his argument is far longer, more complex and interesting than as I have expressed it in the examples I have given. I use them to illustrate the void we risk introducing when we describe our faith in terms which people without such familiarity will not understand. We do not often go out of our way to find a common understanding of a sensation through which to communicate our faith experience. (I sometimes wonder whether faithful people in our churches or those listening to broadcast services understand some of the more obscure words we hear used). The use of religious words, because they are so often narrowly applied, also encourages other Christians to link them only with Sunday, with 'religion', with the dogma of faith but not with experience of God.

We need to find words which help other people to recognise their 'of God' experiences. If we claim to be ministers in secular employment I believe we have a responsibility to help people realise that they do have these experiences in their ordinary working every-day lives and to find the words to express them. These experiences can then be linked with those knowingly related to their faith gained through their Sunday experiences. This could enable them to see their experience at work as of God, to realise their incarnational faith. So what are these words?

I do not particularly want to ditch all religious words although at times I find their use of limited value. Rather I want to find other words to describe experience so that people may recognise the experience and then appreciate it as being 'of God' even when it is not in church, even when it is in secular employment. I have struggled with this for a while and

¹ *Philosophical Investigations* I, 243-314; Lecture on Private Experience, (ed. R Rhees, *Philosophical Review*, LXXVII, 1968) pp.278-81, 284-5, 288-91, 295-7, 316-18

² *The Wittgenstein Reader* Ed Anthony Kenny London:Blackwell 1994

have suggested³ a number of alternative ways in which we might describe similar experiences, alternative ways in which the experience suggested by religious words might be expressed. I offer two examples - consider the words redemption and mercy.

God's redemption (a religious word) is being worked out all the time. It is there whenever someone is freed from stereotyping or from despair. It is there in demonstrations of acceptance, of toleration or of forgiveness. It is there when one person acknowledges another and gives her or him a sense of real value. It is there when attempts are made to make up for wrongdoing and hurt.

How can we point up these experiences so that people can recognise God in their lives? How can we give expression to these experiences so that they can be *seen* as 'redemption' being accomplished day by day? How can we make the experience described by religious words used on Sunday, recognisable in the experience of people's lives from Monday to Saturday? Each of us works in a different context and the activities in your workplace will be different from mine. Each of us needs to be aware, to watch for the signs, to recognise where and when they arise. If we can help other Christians to do this same discerning for themselves, that is a blessing. If it is an exercise that we have to undertake in isolation because the opportunities to share are not there, at least we can give thanks for it. If we can go further and see where opportunities might be made for these activities to be made possible and the signs to be made evident, that too, is something to be thankful for.

Each week, Sunday by Sunday, we ask for God's mercy on us. We hear of God's mercy, preached from the pulpit. Mercy is not an everyday word. How can the experience of mercy be realised, recognised and articulated in our every day lives? It is there in the encounter with compassion at work. It is there in the acts of clemency within friendships and relationships of humanity, in the care for those worse off or in trouble. It is there in the leniency of disputes resolved, in understanding which leads to forgiveness. Mercy is a Sunday word. The experience of mercy under other names is found in secular employment as it is in the church. How can we show this to be true? We have to 'see' the activities which demonstrate it and find the words to describe it.

If we want people to recognise the presence of God in their lives in their ordinary working environments we have to find words which enable those experiences to be recognised and named. I believe very strongly in the dynamic, energising, provoking, encouraging, demanding, caring, loving power, sustaining presence of God in all of life. I do not only experience this on Sunday. We so readily dismiss our own experiences as being human, not Godly - yet we also claim that God is incarnate, in creation, in us. We believe that we are in relationship with God, that God's spirit is vibrant and present with us. We might be in danger of trying to shut it up in church buildings.

Finding language to describe sensations is not easy, especially when we have 'learned' that these experiences are religious and therefore to do with 'holy' or 'special' times. This will not be an easy exercise. One of the first things to do is to educate ourselves. We are conditioned as much as anyone else. We, too, are brought up to use religious words to describe our experience of God. We, also, have to learn a new language. How do we find the words to help people to make these links? We have to find words for ourselves first, ordinary secular words which describe our experience so that we can share that with other people.

³ Word parallels: an exercise for use in groups when considering the use of religious and secular language. This was introduced to CHRISM Conference November 2001 Further information from the author.

We have to find ways of seeking evidence of those experiences in the day-to-day world. How can we recognise the working out of confession and repentance, of mission, of resurrection, of eschatology perhaps or prophecy or revelation – in *our* working lives and describe it using not church words but ordinary every day language? We have to look for examples – but they are there before us all the time. We have to train ourselves to recognise them in a language which is that used in our working environment. Only then, I think, will we be able to help other people to recognise their experiences in their work, at work, as of God.