

To see, to judge, to act

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This is the first of three articles based on presentations given by Bishop Christopher to a gathering of Manchester NSMs on 15 September 2001. The series will continue in the next two editions.

"Seeing" God the creator in the workplace.

How times change. Most of Jesus' early followers were, by our standards, ministers in secular employment. Think of Simon the Zealot, a freedom fighter, alongside Matthew, a tax collector for the forces of occupation. Paul claims it a virtue that he supports his ministry by making tents.

In different ways, their secular employment contributes towards their mission to bear witness to the Kingdom of God that was beginning to be seen breaking into daily life and work. Although Jesus at one point calls them away from their nets, it is while they are fishing that Peter, Andrew and James meet the Risen Christ.

The people who really had to justify their existence were those who claimed to be earning their pay by preaching the gospel.

Nowadays the roles are reversed. It is ministers in secular employment who feel that they have to justify themselves. But the minister in secular employment has more in common with the working life of the apostles than today's stipendiary clergy. Archbishop Michael Ramsey, in his classic work "The Christian Priest Today", says that ministers in secular employment belong most truly to the apostolic foundation. He writes: "We may learn from them of the inward meaning of priesthood" (SPCK, 1972, p.4). Instead of 'being the vicar' in your place of work, you may have insights for the whole people of God in 'being the priest' for whichever community we serve.

The question I ask is this: "In what ways does ordination help you seek the kingdom of God within your workplace?"

A minister in secular employment has a unique and special role. Within a place of employment you live out your ordination vows within an environment that may neither recognise them nor understand why someone should seek to follow them. Within the church, you are seen as a minister upon whom demands are made by employers who may not see themselves as part of any community of faith. Whichever way you turn, whether towards church or towards work, it is as though someone else is always looking over your shoulder.

This may give you a feeling which some call "liminality", a sense of being on the edge: on the edge of the workplace, on the edge of the Church fellowship. That might be a very positive place to stand. Your vision is unique and it will help others. This dilemma is faced by many Christians as they seek to live out their faith in the workplace, and most feel that the church simply fails to address it. Hear this comment from a report that I received last week: "I spend an hour a week teaching in Sunday School and they haul me up to the front of the church to pray for me. The rest of the week I'm a full-time teacher and the church has never prayed for me. That says it all."

A survey of 400 working Christians, published in 1993, revealed that most thought that Church life and work life failed to connect. Sunday didn't help Monday. Yet 92% of the Christians surveyed saw their work, at least in part, as a vocation. 89% saw it as integral to the mission of the church. A minister in secular employment has a unique opportunity to make these connections. I believe that the presence of an ordained minister within a workplace will make a difference to it.

There are some theological disciplines that can help, so let us look at some of the resources that are available - and work together in exploring a theology of ministry in the workplace. I propose that we use a traditional model of theological reflection -

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To see - that is, how do we discern the hand of God the creator within the world of work?

To judge - that is, how do we relate God incarnate to the limitations within which we work?

To act - that is, how do we relate the redeeming nature of God's rule to the range of actions open to us within the workplace?

To See - Discerning God the Creator

There is an important sentence missing in the Church of England's new Baptism service. We used to say, "God is the creator of all things, and by the birth of children he gives parents a share in the work and joy of creation."

In the Hebrew tradition, God relates to the created order through the metaphor of Work; many trades and crafts provide an image of theism: the refiner's fire (Malachi 3.2), the metal worker's forge (Isaiah 1.25 & 54.16), irrigation (Isaiah 43.19, Psalm 104.10-11), bleaching (Malachi 3.2), building (Psalm 127.1, Isaiah 5.2, Amos 7.8-9), pottery (Jeremiah 18.6), forestry (Isaiah 10.33-34), threshing (Isaiah 28.23-29). This marks Judaism out from the other religions of the ancient world.

God the creator is God the worker. The origins of this insight lie deep within the dawn of human religious consciousness. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness: and let them have dominion..." (Genesis 1.26). "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (2.15). Yes, a curse follows the Fall: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread." (3.19). And we live each day within the tension of creation and fall.

But our account of Creation says that it is the privilege, dignity and responsibility of every human being to develop the world under God - what we might call "creative management". Humankind is made in the image of God the Creator, God the refiner, God the potter, God the metalworker. How do we react to the idea of God the sales rep., God the tax inspector [*sounds good to me! Ed.*], God the librarian, God the dentist, God the schoolteacher?

Michael Ranken has been a food technologist for many years. He has also exercised a very distinguished ordained ministry in his secular employment. He says that to affirm God the creator is to affirm a wide range of interdependent activity about which it is difficult to wax lyrical! He says: "The farmer tending crops or animals shares in the work and joy of creation. So does the canner or freezer of his produce, the supermarket assistant, the manufacturer of tyres for the tractor, the scientists testing fertilizers and the bank manager organising finance for them all. The creation they share is concrete; among other things it is part of the creation of you and I. Take the creative activity of any one them away and we shall die, literally. I cannot say these words and you cannot hear them unless our muscles have been nourished with the food which they each worked to give us."

To depend on God is, in part, to depend upon these people and their work. The goodness of God is in what they do.

We believe it in our heads. It's easy to say that we believe in the creator, the Father, the giver of all. But we miss the incarnation itself, that God is known through the flesh and blood, the nuts and bolts, of this world: mediated through the work of human beings. These are not simply symbols, but reality. Think how your workplace, however imperfectly, reflects some aspect of God's creative activity.

Let me introduce you to a resource for theological reflection and engagement. The group CHRISM - the National Association of Christians in secular Ministry - publish a quarterly

journal, "Ministers-at-Work". Here are three stories of how contributors relate their work to God the Creator.

Graham Cornish is a priest from Ripon and Leeds Diocese. He has been President of the Library Association for the year 2000. He says: "I firmly believe that libraries and librarians are an intrinsic part to the revelation of God's creation of the world. An essential part of this creation is the use of the creativity of the human mind. It is the role of the library to reveal this to whoever needs it in whatever place and in whatever format. Librarians have always done this without fear or favour either for the creator or for the person needing access to the creativity."

Richard Syms is a priest who is a professional actor. He says of his profession: "There are things here which can nourish the spiritual health of a nation, which, if we allow to wither, will send our culture spiralling downwards into a valueless and shallow abyss."

At a recent conference of ministers in secular employment a person talked of how the shop-counter could become an altar when the interchange across it became holy.

Over to you! How do you see God the creator at work within your workplace and how do you relate this to the work?