

Sunday 5th October 2025, i.e. 16th Sunday after Trinity, St Mary's Church Dorchester

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

In the name of the Father...

Jesus says,

Do you thank a slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.”

This parable raises a number of questions for me. All of those questions are about work. The first question I have is about this “ought”: what is it that, looking back on our work, “we ought to have done”?

When I take a funeral, it's often for people I didn't know. To prepare myself I meet with the closest relatives or friends of those who've died. One of the first questions I ask them is something like, “Tell me about your loved one; tell me what made them tick.” Then, either fluently or with a little bit of prompting, they give me an account of the person's likes and dislikes; their values; their work. And – very often – it is strongly emphasised to me how much purpose the person found in their work. In the case of elderly people this was often several decades in the past; but their families still remember them as people whose self-esteem depended on earning a living.

Now, in the context of a funeral visit I would take all of that at face value. But I feel slightly differently about the forward-looking question about how we as Christians ought to live. There is a natural pride and joy to be found in hard work well done, and I would never advise people not to value work. But there are spiritual risks in every set of desires, and work can become an idol just as easily as the next thing. Sometimes work is a distraction from other demands that love makes of us.

I'm sure that each of our loved ones will have a similar conversation with their minister. But the question I ask of you (and of myself) is this: will our loved ones have more to say? Will they be able to say how our employment was linked to our primary work as Christians – to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ? Will it be obvious to them – would it be obvious to anyone else? – how

our daily labours showed love for God and love for our neighbour? That's the thing that we ought to do above all else: so have we done it? Are we doing it now?

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I think we as Christians should value work differently. That's the first thing I wanted to say. The second question that this parable raises for me, is about the word “worthless”. Why do the slave calls themselves “worthless”, and what might mean for us?

A lot of the traditional discussion about this passage focuses on that word. The Greek word is *achreios*: it literally means “without use”, or “useless”. This isn't a comment about the slave's skills or lack of them: after all, the slave in the parable says that they have completed every one of their tasks adequately – they say this in a matter-of-fact sort of manner; they aren't expecting to be contradicted. They are as competent and as skilled as could ever be expected. The parable suggests that the slave (which is us, of course) has done what they were “ordered” to do [vv. 9-10]. It might be argued that there is some higher standard that they are measuring against – such as the ability to anticipate the master's desires. Nevertheless, the message is still that the slaves have, by their own standards, satisfied their role perfectly. So there's something enigmatic here: if any person can consider themselves useful, surely it is the person who does exactly what they believe they ought to do. Yet this slave calls themselves useless.

While this may not make any sense if we're talking about the slave of a human master, it makes a good deal more sense if the Master in question is God. God is not like us. God isn't a link in our chains of supply and demand. If God needed anything God would already have had it before the creation of the world, and will continue to have it after all things have passed away. So unlike a human master who is dependent upon the labour of slaves and suffers the same weaknesses that they do, our heavenly Master does not need slaves. Humans are literally useless to our God: and however good our work is, God does not need it.

Perhaps the most important implication of this is that we cannot earn God's love. It's a hard truth: it might be the hardest doctrine of Christianity, and we might spend a lifetime of faithful work failing to learn it. God's doesn't need anything that we have to give. So if we are looking to make ultimate sense of our work, we have to look elsewhere.

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I say that God doesn't need things, but there's no reason why God shouldn't want things. And as it happens, a good part of the Bible, and Christian tradition since, is an expression of God's desire for us, and God's desire for our desire.

“Work” is a word that is loaded with all sorts of negative connotations in Christian theology. Rather than talking about work, theologians are much more comfortable talking about *vocation*: not an activity as such, but rather a relationship in which one party calls to another and that party responds by saying, “Here I am.” God doesn't need us. Vocation is where we learn that God nevertheless *wants* us, and often wants us to do stuff.

Much later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus uses a dispute between his disciples to talk about Christian vocation. He's covering similar ground to the parable in our Gospel today when he says

the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (22:26-27)

Jesus' life is the pattern for our lives: our vocations and our work. He was born in poverty as one of us. He certainly chose that as an act of obedience, as Paul says [Philippians 2:1-11], but an obedience which was fundamentally un-self-interested. As the eternally begotten Son of God, he had nothing to gain from becoming human; and in human terms his life was marked by a famous degree of failure and pain.

The failure and pain Jesus experienced should be a reassurance to us, when we're uncertain whether we've done all we ought to do – or when we're certain we haven't. But it's his un-self-interestedness that should really inspire us when we're thinking about why we might work, and how we might do it. Can we work in a way which is free from fear: free from defensiveness; free from a need to be needed? Can we work as though God's desire for us is the only thing in the world that matters? If so – if we can work for no other reason than love – then we might actually look like Christ's body in the world, and we will be freed to live and work to his praise and glory.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.