

To Act

How do we relate the redeeming nature of God's rule to the range of actions open to us within the workplace?

(This is the third part of the article by Christopher Mayfield, Bishop of Manchester, entitled 'To See, To Judge, To Act', examining Ministry in Secular Employment. It was delivered as a talk to a gathering of MSEs, NSMs and OLMs in Manchester Diocese, September 2001).

The priest is a representative figure. In experiencing the sensations of feeling trapped, compromised, or wounded by the sin of the world, we are sharing in the same process of incarnation that God risked in Jesus Christ - giving up the security of heaven for the compromise of living within a fallen creation. We experience solidarity with the victims. We are motivated by a hope that promises some of liberation or resolution.

What makes this priestly is that our role is a focal one - representing the concern of God and God's people for the whole world, interceding for the world we know, helping the world perceive its own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the light of Christ's teaching and life.

For some, this is a pastoral role - perhaps our role within the workplace is to help others to handle the bereavement of moving jobs, or offices, or retirement.

For some, this is a prophetic role. This may not be the dramatic whistle-blowing that hits the headlines. It may reside in quiet, patient negotiation, interpretation and mediation. The Ridley Hall Foundation in Cambridge sponsors a project known as Faith in Business. A seminar held in March 1998 on Establishing Trust in the Construction Industry made real progress in encouraging partnerships between all the different parties that often falls into acrimonious debate during a building project: clients, main contractors, specialist contractors, engineers, architects and surveyors.

For some, there is a role of intercessory prayer. Richard Syms, the professional actor and priest, writes movingly about life within the theatre, where there is no community as such: simply a ministry to be exercised 'among' whichever cast and team to which he belongs for a particular production. He says, "I keep a prayer list, inevitably a somewhat arbitrary one, of people I've worked with, and colleagues who have died. It's the nearest thing to a system that I have. If it starts to feel empty, I tell myself that I might be the only person praying for that person, and so possibly a deeply priestly function.

Some will seek opportunities for evangelism. They will see some dilemmas within the workplace as appropriate opportunities to witness to their faith with sensitivity - and as a result in some professions they can discover that far more people than they realise work alongside them motivated by Christian or other faith-based outlooks. This might be the case in the health-care profession, for example.

Within each workplace there is the critical need to see which creative activity within it reflects the character of God the creator, to judge which activity obscures it, and to act in such a way that the rule of God is sought.

These "kingdom moments", or "kingdom challenges", present themselves in a variety of ways. There will be a variety of responses according to the nature of each situation. But I wonder which you find the most attractive.

a. To challenge directly.

Maybe we see a form of institutional hypocrisy in the place where we work, and the only way it can change is for us to help challenge it directly. An example might be in the realm of education, where students are invited to apply for courses unsuitable for their needs but which keep a college's funding secure. We might be unhappy that our company delays paying its bills yet puts the screws on its own customers when they can't cough up straight away. We stand up for patients who can't always make their hospital appointments, yet are in need of medical attention and understanding, rather than a peevish and irritable welcome from the receptionist.

The advantage of a direct challenge is that clear communication can deliver clear results. The disadvantage is that we have to be secure in our role unless we are ready to take a deliberate risk with the safety of our job. Our free speaking might cost us the promotion our abilities deserve, and we might have a responsibility to provide for our family as well.

Some employees may experience an overwhelming sense of powerlessness or despair if they discover that the people to whom they would appeal over suspicions of corruption in others are themselves corrupt as well.

Yet, where a trust has been betrayed, or discipline has been broken, a clear challenge can promote good teamwork and a better outcome for many, including those who benefit from the product or service a workplace provides. This is a "kingdom" issue.

b. To resign

The advantage of this course of action is that it gives the clearest possible indication of our moral position. The disadvantage is that we can no longer influence events within our workplace - and the crisis within it continues. There are some situations where our integrity is compromised so badly if we stay that we feel we have no alternative but to seek alternative employment. It reminds us that we are, in the end, capable of defining our own goals in work, and are challenged to keep them.

But, if we are tempted to resign, I wonder how we react to those who see that approach as a little like Jesus coming down from the cross. Listen to this from Peterborough Diocese' Faith and Work programme: "The point of being where you are is to affirm what is good and resist what is not, even if your ability to resist is very limited. Christ is also limited by the misuse of human freewill and by the corruption which infects everything in society to some degree or another. As Jesus said, it's not the whole who need a physician but the sick. If you feel your situation is pretty sick making then maybe you are well placed in it. You aren't necessarily going to make the world a better place by looking for somewhere more pleasant and rewarding. It would be like a doctor preferring to work with people who don't trouble him with unpleasant conditions. The best doctors are most effective at the point of greatest need."

c. To accept, but actively to question.

It's important to win the trust of those around us, otherwise we can't achieve very little. This means accepting the limitations of our role and of the realities the workplace has to address. But this does not mean that we accept them at face value. We can prompt our colleagues to think through the consequences of their actions.

As a Journalist we understand the concept of deadlines. We meet them, but does that mean that at 10.45 we have to place hurried pressure on a bereaved relative to speak about a tragic death in time for the 11.00 bulletin?

There are wider questions that can be sown in our colleagues' minds to identify the broader context in which we work. For example, to ask what it is that drives many to work over-long hours and to expect others to do the same. It is too simple to put it down to greed. It is to do with our expectations, our family demands, maybe our sense of self-worth.

d. To acknowledge our vulnerability.

There is a fourth way of engagement. As a priest, and as a person in secular employment, we can make the same mistakes, or errors of judgment, or take decisions the consequences of which weigh heavily upon us for a long time, as would any member of the workplace where we are based. Henri Nouwen's image of Christ as the Wounded Healer is important here. Often, through shared vulnerability, the shared admission of weakness, profound Christian ministry – and even healing – can take place. To work for redemption requires first an admission of need. That applies to us all, wherever we may be. To acknowledge vulnerability, in the appropriate context, can liberate.

You will have examples of these and similar issues. Which model do you identify with most? Do you walk into a situation? Walk away from it? Walk cautiously around it, looking for an opportunity to intervene? Or get hurt by it, being alongside others who are hurt?

These questions, of course, are not unique to the workplace, though they are in very sharp focus there. You have insights that those in stipendiary ministry, and within the worshipping community, need to hear.

A very important and influential article about this whole process was written as long ago as 1973. It can be found in the book *"Tentmaking"*, a collection of key theological reflections upon self-supporting ministry, edited by James and Leslie Francis. The article, written by Kenneth Mason, is entitled *"Can a priest be part-time?"* He answers with an emphatic "No!" The reasons he offers are fascinating. Here is part of what he says:

"What God calls, claims and means to use is not some part of the human potential but the whole, the concrete individual, the person."

It is then that you can spot what some might call secular sacraments – signs of God's work and grace within the world of work, leisure and daily living. These in turn point the church towards offering a more authentic witness to the coming Kingdom of God. These may be signs which demonstrate penitence, forgiveness and reconciliation; justice for the poor; healing for those who grieve; freedom for those whose humanity is diminished, oppressed, incarcerated. The manifesto, in fact, of

the Year of Jubilee which Jesus used to describe his mission, a mission to be expressed within the world, not merely for the benefit of a select few.

(Christopher is to retire as Bishop of Manchester in September this year. We wish he and Caroline well in the future).