

To Judge

How do we relate God incarnate to the limitations within which we work?

This is the second article in a series of three 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 the Manchester Diocese, September 2001

To look for God's creative activity within the workplace reveals some uncomfortable questions:

- They may be to do with management. The aims of an organisation might be laudable - but what about the betrayals of trust and double-dealing some feel necessary to keep the show on the road?
- They may be to do with the product. Some have a conscience about selling tobacco, alcohol or arms, but also have a living to make to support their family.
- They may be to do with the ethical dilemmas within a job. A maternity nurse may be asked to help save life at one end of the ward and terminate it at the other.

I here's an old story of a person who was lost. He came to a village, and asked for directions from the local post office. The shopkeeper hesitated. "Well if I was you I wouldn't start from here!" That, in a nutshell, expresses the dilemma we have in seeing a God of moral absolutes, of pure goodness, in a world that falls short of ideal.

To speak of God incarnate is to speak of God sharing his/her very nature within the compromises, hurts and entrapments of the world as it is.

Peter Hall, formerly Bishop of Woolwich, in 1993 said this:

"Religious people are peculiarly unwilling to recognise that most choices are between greater or lesser evils. Because we believe in goodness and love as absolute values, we imagine we can make choices in which such absolutes are open to us. They rarely are. They never worked for Jesus, who was born into a world to live out fully God's love for humankind. Even by being born, it led to other children in Bethlehem being slaughtered. His mission hurt his own family. For his mother it was like a 'sharp sword'. If our Lord found that whatever course he chose was going to hurt somebody, how can we, his followers, expect to be free from such consequences? But people with whom we need to share our faith certainly know they cannot avoid it. They feel condemned by a faith that suggests they cannot make choices untinged by evil. They know their hands are dirty, and will go on being so. They need a Gospel that unflinchingly recognizes that."

Our starting-point is well expressed in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness"

(Chapter 2).

God accepted the *limitations* of human existence in order to redeem them. God didn't avoid them.

A senior Industrial Missioner, addressing managers in Glasgow some years ago, said that many Christians see compromise as a dirty word. And so it is if it means simply putting up with a bad job. But he went on to say that Christians could accept compromise while continuing to analyse and act on the various factors surrounding the problem. "Compromise

is ethically static. Compromise plus questioning is ethically dynamic.”

One possibility is to opt out of a compromising decision or situation - that is, to resign. Sometimes an individual's conscience, before the Word of God, will demand nothing less. But many of the decisions we make are not that absolute. Michael Ranken, whom I quoted earlier, reflects upon the way we can feel trapped.

“A man with a gun robs a bank. He sinned, we say. But a psychologist asks, ‘Did this man sin or his father? Or the society which raised him?’

“At the time the bank is being robbed, a large sum of money is being transferred from the (contributory) pension fund of a local business to an investment trust whose portfolio includes companies in Brazil and Taiwan with excellent profits, prospects, repressive employment policies and aggressive sales pitches, which are undermining jobs in manufacturing industries here. The clerk who makes the computer entry knows much of this and is aware that he is simultaneously doing good to some of his immediate neighbours and probably evil to many unknown people in several countries. He does his work well, and he commits no identifiable sin, but still he shares in the sin of the world and he shares its guilt. He suffers and is unable to do anything about it. To resign, to refuse his task, to push it on to someone else, will solve nothing; he cannot come down from his cross.”

St. Paul continues his letter to the Philippians by quoting a popular hymn:

“And being found in human form, Christ Jesus humbled himself

And became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” (2:7,8)

God incarnate embraces voluntarily the bank clerk trapped in his work, and the individuals whose livelihoods are threatened by the decisions he puts into practice. He lives within the humiliation of being trapped, and somehow makes the limitations, which define his life on earth, work for him in advancing, through the cross, the Kingdom of God.

I wonder if you have examples of how you have experienced similar tensions in your work? A self-conscious choice that means someone is bound to get hurt no matter what we decide? A knowledge that we are part of a bigger pattern of social or economic organisation which we believe to be fundamentally unfair?

How do we cope when our contract of employment requires us to do things which, from a Christian perspective, we disapprove of: such as disciplining people whose predicament we understand? Or making people redundant through no fault of their own?

Are there ways in which we experience God within the circumstances? Could we make the limitations of our situation work for our understanding of ministry? Do we have a story that remains unresolved, untidy, a source of frustration?