

# ***Ministers-at-Work***

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## Editorial

Welcome to this, my first edition as editor! Huge thanks are due to Pauline Pearson for her six dedicated years in the role – a hard act to follow indeed! Thanks, as ever, are due to our contributors too.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is in the news a lot and here is a thoughtful piece based on the work of the CHRISM discussion group which explores the impact of machine learning in the workplace and our response to it. There follows a reflection, inspired by Saint Charles de Foucauld, on the hidden years of Jesus while he was working as a carpenter in Nazareth. There are two articles arising from the latest meeting with our European colleagues and exploring the challenge of how to work out our calling “to be with” or “to be for” the poor and marginalised?

These are difficult times for so many people at work – cost of living pressures, skills shortages, rising costs and uncertainties. How can we respond? Please join in the conversations and work of CHRISM – send in a letter (better still an article), join the CHRISM Theology Discussion Group and book now for the Reflective Weekend in February. The Rt. Reverend and Rt. Hon. Dame Sarah Mulally, DBE, Bishop of London is booked to speak. As a member of the House of Lords and a former Chief Nursing Officer, she will have important insights to share.

Meanwhile, happy reading.

*Rebecca Craven*

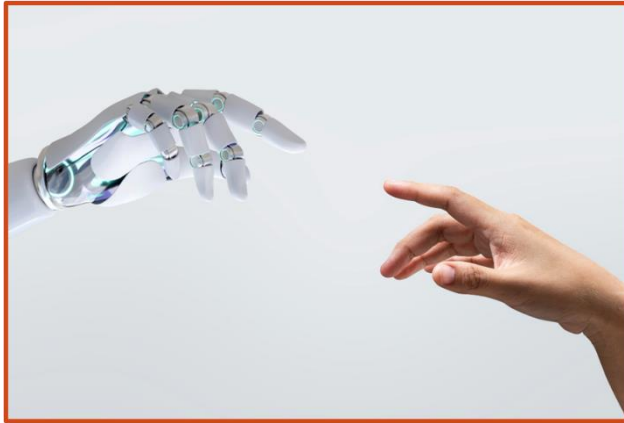
# Should we be worried that the potential threat to jobs from new technology could rob life of meaning and purpose?

*Julian Blakemore*

***This article is based on conversations at a CHRISM Theology Discussion Group meeting held on Thursday, 27 July 2023.***

*Jesus said: “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matt. 6.34).*

There has been a lot of talk recently about the possibility of jobs disappearing due to increased automation based on machine learning/Artificial Intelligence (AI). In many ways, the impact of new technology on the world of work is not a new phenomenon. Since the start of the Industrial Revolution 250 years ago, workers have moved from agriculture to manufacturing and then to services. What is different this time is the types of jobs that might be affected. The areas where it’s being suggested these tools could be used have previously been considered beyond the reach of technology, for example, the law, medicine, journalism, writing, even acting! The ongoing writers and actors strikes in the US are about the potential threat of this new technology to their livelihoods. The Writers Guild of America (WGA) is worried that generative AI (machine-learning systems capable of creating text, images and video, such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT), could allow studios to cut costs by using AI-produced scripts without the need for human writers. The Screen Actors Guild (Sag-Aftra) is afraid that actors could be replaced by AI-generated digital likenesses.



I'm sure some will feel that this belongs to the realms of science fiction rather than a theology discussion group but for many workers, like the writers and actors in the US, the issue of job security and future prospects is becoming very real, very quickly. We could just wait and see what happens and hope for the best. However, given the potentially far-reaching consequences this could have for us in terms of our understanding of ourselves, the work we do, our sense of meaning and purpose in life, our physical and economic wellbeing, how we feel valued, our place in society and sense of belonging, it feels like a more proactive approach is required.

### **The place of work in faith and theology?**

Work is currently central to our existence for the following reasons:

- It's fundamental to our understanding of ourselves, our relation to and our place in the World.
- It's an economic necessity for most.
- It's a basic building block of society, enabling us to contribute and feel valued. It is a source of social cohesion.
- It gives meaning and purpose to life.

- It generates wealth and paying people for the work they do is a way of sharing prosperity in society.

From the beginning, work is ordained as part of the human lot, celebrated as sharing in God's creation (Gen. 3). Jesus called his first disciples to follow him from their vocations but the fishermen, at least, went back to their secular professions from time to time. Jesus did not require all his followers to give up their everyday work and much of his teaching drew on themes from the world of everyday work. St. Paul also regarded work positively, encouraging all Christians to continue in their work and to do it well (Colossians 3:23-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12) and, of course, he supported his ministry by continuing to work as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Whilst the Bible promotes honest work, it has some very harsh words for those who don't work. Probably the strongest language is in 2 Thess. 3.10-12: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."



PAUL IN THE HOUSE OF AQUILA AND PRISCILLA

Although some in the early church expected that Jesus would return in their own lifetimes and initially withdrew from secular activity to focus on being prepared for his coming again, as time passed and hopes became extended, the general Christian pattern for the first century after the Apostles was to continue in their everyday occupations. Christians did the same jobs as unbelievers but sought to do so in a distinctly Christian way, serving and glorifying God in and through their occupations.

The church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria (150 – c. 215 CE)<sup>1</sup>, saw the value of work in keeping people occupied, not just to satisfy their own needs but also the needs of others less able to provide for themselves. Doing an honest day's work also had positive benefits for the Christian character as an antidote to idleness and temptation.

The Reformers, both Lutheran and Calvinist, stressed ordinary daily work as part of every Christian's call to serve God. Even the most mundane task was dignified as contributing to the common good and being blessed by God, as much as any sacred calling.

In eighteenth century Britain, the Evangelical Revival saw the emergence of a new strand of religious enthusiasm and missionary fervour, most prominently in the Methodist movement. John Wesley's sermon on *The Use of Money* (c.1760) urged Methodists to follow three simple rules for the wise use of money: “*Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.*” This famous quote emphasises the importance of hard work and service to others in the outworking of their faith.

Catholic social teaching has much to say on the subject of work and its importance to individuals and communities: the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) is concerned amongst other things with the structure of work and how it impacts workers' welfare; *Gaudium et*

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<sup>1</sup> The Salvation of the Rich Man (c.203 CE)

*Spes* (“joy and hope”) from Vatican II (1965) is an assertion of Catholic teaching that situates human work within God's eternal purpose and plan for humanity; the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981) explains the practical and spiritual importance of human work in terms of subsistence, economic structures and our relationship with Christ; whilst Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015) is focused on humanity's relationship with the planet, it notes that technological advances are not neutral and involve deciding what kind of society we want to build.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociologist Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-5), in which he credits the religious beliefs of the 16th and 17th century puritans and their successors to the emergence of what he identified as the *Protestant work ethic*. With its emphasis on the value of hard work, thrift, and efficiency, he believed this was a driving force in the development of modern capitalism.

With the evolution of economic activity and the increasing diversity, complexity and multitude of ways in which people earn a living or give their time and energy in today’s mixed economies, the Church, perhaps understandably, has struggled to keep in touch with social change and developments in the world of work. A consequence of it having become more distanced from the work ordinary people do, is that it has lost its vision and prophetic voice in this important area. This is a sad state of affairs, because the Christian faith has much to say about the value of people and building community at a time when these aspects of life are being challenged. It is assumed that there will always be enough work for people to do but what if there isn’t, or it isn’t the right kind of work for their skills and capabilities?

## Threats

The difficulty is that no one knows for sure what AI might mean for the world of work. A PwC report for the UK Government in 2021<sup>2</sup> estimated that around 7% of existing UK jobs could face a high (over 70%) probability of automation over the next 5 years, rising to around 18% after 10 years and just under 30% after 20 years. Activities most susceptible to automation include physical ones in predictable environments, such as operating machinery and preparing fast food. Collecting and processing data are two other categories of activities that increasingly can be done consistently and faster by machines using algorithms. This could displace large amounts of workers—for instance, in loan/mortgage origination, paralegal work, accounting, and back-office transaction processing.

Based on total UK employment of around 32.4 million in 2018<sup>3</sup> the equivalent numbers of jobs displaced could be around 2.2 million jobs over the next 5 years, just under 6 million over the next 10 years and around 9 million over the next 20 years. The effects will not be uniform across the country. There are likely to be considerable variations between and within regions, reflecting different sector concentrations and occupational mixes.

On the plus side, AI is also expected to create new jobs. Some would be in areas linked to AI and other related technologies (e.g. data scientists, robotic engineers or people involved in the design and manufacture of sensors for driverless vehicles and drones). Others are foreseen in *hard-to-automate* services, such as health and personal care, where demand is anticipated to increase as a result of an ageing population and a rise in real incomes and spending from AI-generated

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<sup>2</sup> PwC (2021), The Potential Impact of Artificial Intelligence on UK Employment and the Demand for Skills - A report by PwC for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; BEIS Research Report Number: 2021/042

<sup>3</sup> ONS Labour Force Survey

productivity improvements. However, the overall net effect on employment levels cannot be predicted with any degree of accuracy because the technology is still in its infancy. History tells us that over time labour markets will adjust to changes in demand for workers from technological disruptions, although at times with depressed real wages. It is interesting to note that despite rapid digital innovation in recent decades, the UK employment rate is at an historical high.<sup>4</sup> Yet there is no guarantee that this will prove to be a reliable guide to the future in this case.

AI could revolutionise both work and leisure through the continuation of skill-biased technological change. However, with that comes the potential to widen existing earnings differentials between those with the requisite skills and those without and to deepen regional/class wealth and opportunity divides. Furthermore, indications are that entry-level jobs for younger workers may be more likely to be automated which, despite young people's greater adaptability, could make it harder for them to get on the jobs ladder.

Technology shapes us. Just think about how our dependence on smartphones has grown in the last 20 years. Whether we like it or not, in some respects human evolution has already become tied to the latest software upgrade. Technology has the power to turn us into disciples, not of the living God, but of the tech billionaires. AI is just the next step. Christians need to engage with today's technology creatively but also critically if this pitfall is to be avoided.

Clearly, the impacts of AI will depend on the speed and extent of the adoption of technology solutions and will vary by location and type of work. However, the upheaval could be significant in terms of people having to / being able to change professions and/or reskill.

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<sup>4</sup> The latest UK employment rate for 16-64 year olds of 76.5% in Q4 2019 is the highest since comparable records began in 1971 (source: ONS).

## Response

The debate has yet to really get going on this topic. However, leaving outcomes solely at the discretion of markets and organisations doesn't feel like an adequate response. Do we trust them not to act purely in terms of their own self-interest? Technology might exist that can improve operational productivity and efficiency which organisations will be keen to make use of but in a caring and Compassionate society (i.e. one aligned with Christian values), financial results should not be the only consideration. Technology doesn't have to be exploited to the full without proper concern for the societal and human implications. Potential changes need to be carefully considered and planned for so that disruptions can be managed with appropriate support for those who are adversely impacted.



Some countries, for instance, are exploring the idea of *Universal Basic Income (UBI)*. Trials are underway in the Nordic countries and the UK. In its purest form, a UBI is a regular payment that is given to everyone

in society to create a minimum income floor. This means that everyone earns the same amount of money through the payment and cannot earn less than that amount. The highest earners would also receive the payment but would also pay more in tax to fund the basic income for everybody. However, there are many forms of UBI and not all are universal – some are more targeted at certain sections of society, e.g. trials in London and Canada focused on rough sleepers. Supporters believe UBI is a way to alleviate poverty, reduce inequality and the stigma associated with benefits as everyone receives the same. Dissenters argue that it's an expensive waste of money. If it becomes harder to find meaningful employment, ensuring everyone has a basic subsistence level of income is fundamental to health and wellbeing. Without people's physical needs being addressed, it is hard to explore other avenues of what it means to be fully human.

Christianity has a valuable contribution to make to this debate but needs to find its voice.

## **Discussion Points**

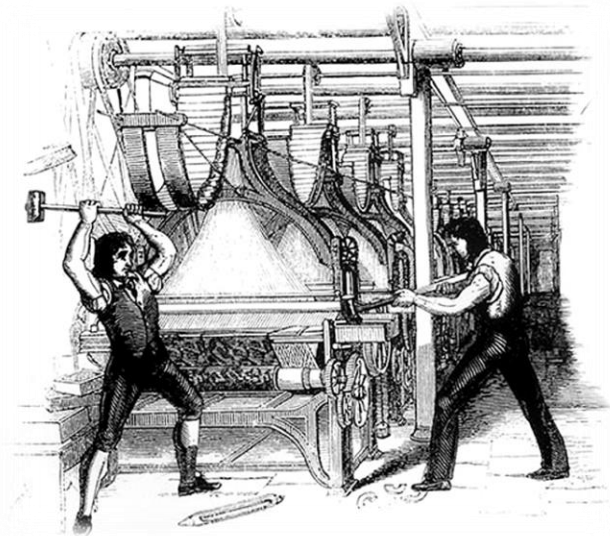
Human Resources are the single most expensive cost to a business or organisation. Management is focused on value for money so productivity and efficiency are key. The critical point is that the add-on cost of employing a person is often two-thirds of their pay (e.g. in Newcastle Diocese, the salary for stipendiary clergy is £42k but the total cost of employing them, including housing, is £85k). Machines don't attract the same level of add-on costs... but can they cover all aspects of the job?

These days, workers are treated more as resources than people. Organisations have to protect themselves to survive, which means that they are focused more on hard financials rather than 'softer' (i.e. more people-focused) aspects of business. Workers are seen either as *profit contribution units* (i.e. as long as an employee is contributing more than a colleague, they will be secure in their role),

or as *cost units* (i.e. an overhead that has to be justified on grounds of affordability). When it comes to decisions about deploying new technology, it can be a simple question of doing the maths. The gamble for policymakers is that new technology will bring new job opportunities that do not exist and we cannot conceive now. This has happened in the past but the so far unanswerable question is will there be enough new jobs to offset the losses that could happen in future and will people have the right skills to do them? The follow-on to this is, if people need to develop new skills to exploit new opportunities, will the necessary training and support be available to them?

The use of technology is often sold to employees as something to help them improve their performance and enable them to be more creative but is often used intrusively to monitor/police their activities and force new standardised practices upon them. Furthermore, the introduction of new technology is often a precursor to reductions in the workforce. For these reasons it can unsettle workers and lead to fear and resentment.

This story is nothing new. Parallels can be drawn to the tensions associated with the mechanisation of textile production as part of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Weavers were not happy about seeing their whole way of life being made obsolete and their skills no longer being valued. Whereas before they had been their own bosses, now they were employees beholden to the whim of factory owners and 'overseers.' This resulted in the *Luddite uprisings* (after the loom smasher Ned Ludd) in response to the changes in working practices that were being introduced.



We live in a paradoxical world where unemployment in the UK is relatively low at c. 4%. Given natural churn in the workforce normally runs at about 4%, this suggests that the economy is at full employment. However, there are labour shortages. Some businesses, like the rail companies, use overtime to plug the gaps because it's cheaper and easier than employing more people. France is seeking to address these shortages by raising its retirement age but this strategy has led to street riots.

One way to make employing people more attractive would be to tax the cost of employment less but there doesn't seem to be much political appetite for this at the moment. The jobs market is changing. There are fewer mass employers and every job has its own specific role profile and requirements. There is less emphasis on finding good people with good attitudes who can be trained and more on candidates having previous experience and ticking the boxes in terms of the role requirements. This can become a vicious circle for some people because, if they struggle to find work, they can't get the

experience. Recruitment is often undertaken by third party agencies as organisations outsource the hiring process and algorithms are used to sift applications. Candidates might tick the boxes but it doesn't mean they'll be good at the job. This can make applying for jobs feel impersonal and extremely challenging.

As employers increasingly seek to avoid the add-on costs of employing people and keep their workforces as flexible as possible, more people are turning to the 'gig economy' where organisations and independent workers engage in short-term, part-time or zero-hours contracts. We are seeing increasing numbers of people with multiple jobs and the question is how easy is it to find meaning and purpose at work when you're having to juggle jobs and responsibilities (e.g. caring), especially if you're having to do it to make ends meet? This is different to someone who is in a position to build a 'portfolio' of roles in chosen areas of activity which can be financially well-rewarded.

There are currently 1.5m people in the UK who are self-employed under IR35 – tax rules for those working off-payroll - for whom these arrangements are considered dubious and are being reviewed. Given the numbers potentially affected, this creates a lot of uncertainty for people over their tax status and any changes will need to be carefully managed.

Perhaps having meaning and purpose in one's life says more about the individual than the work they do. If people have a strong sense of identity and self-worth, they will find meaning and purpose in life. Work, therefore, can be an enhancer of, or detractor from, an individual's sense of self-worth. If the deployment of technology means there is less, or less interesting, work to be done, it may not mean that people will have no meaning or purpose in their lives. However, there will need to be changes in society to create other opportunities for people to express their humanity, contribute to society and pay for the things they need. This means that different

mechanisms (and ways of valuing people's contributions) will need to be put in place to share the wealth that is created in the economy to support those who are unable to engage in paid work.

Finding meaning and purpose at work can be linked to pride. People who take pride in what they do, want to feel that they've done a good job and that they are recognised for being good at what they do. They want to feel that they are fairly rewarded for what they do. Being able to provide for their families and themselves can be a source of satisfaction. However, this feeling is undermined when, despite working long hours, possibly in multiple jobs, people still can't afford the basics.

On average, we spend a third of our lives at work. So, people don't want to be miserable at work. For some, it's a question of being mismatched in a role and finding something more suited to their interests, skills and abilities can be transforming. However, this assumes that people have a choice to do what they like. This often isn't the case.

As the world of work continues to evolve, sometimes we can think we no longer know the world we thought we knew. Sometimes we can feel that the church is no longer where we're at – preaching good news to the faithful while children are starving and young people are struggling to find housing and the world is burning. It's at times like these that we revert to the things we do know. For example, the love of family. The *Oracle at Delphi* focuses on knowing yourself and practising moderation in life (nothing in excess). We are trying to find resources in the world, not just a job but also fulfilment. Finding a sense of fulfilment is not superficial but deep and vocational. It's about finding worthwhileness in work. Everyone's journey is personal and involves identifying helpful waymarkers and tapping into 'wellsprings' of meaning, hope and inspiration through the gospel. We use the resources we have to deepen our sense of what it is to be human.

Having an income helps people to find life itself. People don't need a vast fortune to do this but they do need enough.

### **Questions for further discussion:**

- How do we feel about the wider application of technology and the impact it might have on people's jobs and sense of self-worth?
- Where can we find meaning and purpose in life outside work?
- In what ways can faith in God help people build their own esteem and sense of self-worth?
- How can we help people deal with anxiety they might be feeling about such changes?
- What needs to happen to manage the impacts of new technology for individuals and society as a whole?

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## The Hidden Years of Jesus at Nazareth. A Reflection on St. Charles de Foucauld.

*James M.M. Francis*

In stories about the worker-priests (or priest-workers, as a description of ministers in secular employment - MSEs) occasional reference is made to the hidden years of Jesus' life at Nazareth before his public ministry at the age of thirty (Luke 3.23 cf. John 8.57), a formative period of about eighteen years. There is something of a paradox here in that Scripture tells us almost nothing about this time (though some apocryphal gospels fantasise about it), and yet the workshop at Nazareth is looked upon as significant by the worker-priests. How can this be? This short reflection seeks to explore this phenomenon with the help of a recently published book of eleven essays on St. Charles de Foucauld. The book is called *Brother to All. The Life and Witness of St. Charles de Foucauld*, edited with an introduction by Joseph Victor Edwin SJ. (The page numbers refer to citations and quotations in the book.) The title of the book *Brother to All* encapsulates the practice that de Foucauld espoused, following his coming to faith after a considerable time of restless spiritual seeking while serving in the military, and in undertaking pioneering expeditions in Morocco and Algeria. This background was to serve him well in his life within the church as a hermit. The essays offer a variety of perspectives on de Foucauld's life, his spirituality, the contribution he made to Christian dialogue with Islam, and especially the communities he inspired that adopted his way of life, The Little Brothers of Jesus (founded by René Voillaume) and The Little Sisters of Jesus (founded by Madeleine Hutin), and which as "workers amongst workers" directly contributed to the Worker-Priest movement. In the words of Voillaume (in the gender language of his day) "I am increasingly certain that our form of poverty must be that of poor workmen, ordinary craftsmen, small holders who have to

earn their living, and I am sure this must be the Brotherhood's way of life." (*Brothers of Men*, page 180). And as Little Sister Magdeleine expressed it "The Little Sisters ask to be allowed to live as the leaven in the dough of humanity. They desire to integrate totally with other human beings, while leading a deeply contemplative life, like that of Jesus in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth and on the highways and byways of his public life" (*He Took Me by the Hand* page 189).

The title of the book affirms de Foucauld's core vision of mission as a life embedded witness. "Brother Charles reminds us that the church rediscovers her joy and youth when she crosses the institutional threshold and goes out to meet the men and women of our world" says Little Sister Kathleen (page 32). Witness is thus understood as predominantly "a ministry of presence" (page 111), which de Foucauld himself described as "doing good in silence". At his hermitage at Tamanrasset he considered everyone a brother – "I want all inhabitants, be they Christian, Muslim, or Jewish to look on me as their brother, the universal brother (Matt. 25. 40)" (page 110). Locals considered him a *marabout*, a holy man (page 110). Thus he sought to live and reveal the presence of Christ primarily by example, and it is here that de Foucauld draws upon the significance of Jesus' hidden years. This description of "hiddenness" is not because little if anything is known (apart from the Nativity narratives, the Presentation and the story of Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve in Luke 2.41 ff), but especially because the larger part of Jesus' life is "hidden" in its formational inward, interior meaning (Luke 4.16 cf. 2.51 Nazareth "where he had been brought up", in Greek "*tethrammenos*", i.e. nurtured or formed). From the Gospel stories we learn how Jesus sought times of prayer, and surely this comes from and speaks to what he learned and practised during the hidden years. Moreover, there is the Kingdom theme in the Gospels about what is hidden becoming manifest (Mark 4.22; Matt. 10.26; Luke 8.17, 12.2). That, too, informs the importance of the hidden years for the worker-priests.

In one of the essays, Little Sister Cathy Wright speaks of de Foucauld's "longing to share his idealised notion of the poverty of Jesus" (page 15). This gives one pause for thought. It acknowledges that the focus on Jesus in the workshop at Nazareth is something of an ideal that connects manual work with poverty. The description of Jesus as a "carpenter/*tektōn*" (Mark 6.3 and parallels) would almost certainly have included working in stone, "a stoneworker involved in construction", as Ken Dark describes it (*Archaeology of Jesus' Nazareth*, page 137). For a discussion of the variety of trades encompassed by the term see Raymond E. Brown *The Birth of the Messiah* pages 538-540. A suggestion has also been made that this could include skills in surveying. The gnostic Gospel of Thomas logion 77 declares: "Jesus said, "It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there." One wonders if such imagery derives from the workshop setting of Jesus' upbringing. (That vision continues in the hymn "Lord of all hopefulness", of Jesus "being skilled at the plane and the lathe" and our companion in daily life and work; and in the prayer that begins "Christ the Master Carpenter". See also Christopher Cocksworth "The Church Needs Martha and Mary", page 21.)

Perhaps there was ready work at Sepphoris, a Roman city under construction near to Nazareth though not mentioned in the Gospels (see R. Batey (1984) "Is not this the Carpenter?"; and for cultural attitudes P.H. Furvey (1955) "Christ as *Tektōn*"). However, the most recent archaeological excavation at Nazareth shows that artefacts such as cooking pots and lamps are Jewish only, in contrast to the cosmopolitan nature of finds at Sepphoris. Ken Dark thus describes Nazareth as a loyally Jewish town, comfortably self-supporting, with warm links to Jerusalem firmly divorced from the Hellenistic-Roman city of Sepphoris on the other side of the valley (Dark *Archaeology of Jesus' Nazareth*, 160). Dark suggests (page 145) that Nazareth was "a focus for a local economy including mixed farming, craftworking, and

quarrying... In this respect it was precisely the sort of place in which we might expect to find a *tektōn*". Nazareth was not, however, linked to any prophetic expectation (the likely meaning of John 1.46, cf. 7.52), and when it is first mentioned (Matt. 2.23; Mark 1.9; Luke 1.26) each of the Gospel writers has to identify it as a town in Galilee. (Dunn *Jesus Remembered*, 319-321.)



Doubtless the experience of a working life remained with him (Matt. 7.1-5, Matt. 7.24-27; Mark 11.11; Luke 13.4, 14.28-30). James Dunn concludes that Jesus' upbringing "was not poverty stricken but familiar with poverty" in "a small but not very well-to-do village" (Dunn *Jesus Remembered*, 312-315, 345). It is almost certain Jesus was not ranked among the elites of his day, though there is evidence that he met with people across the social spectrum. (Matt. 11.19/Luke 7.34). Rob Fox has also recently reminded us, in a study of the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Fox "The Labourers in the Vineyard – an MSE View", 35-41), that Jesus had an awareness of the conditions of poverty and wealth (Matt. 11.7-8). In his growing up Jesus is described as the obedient son, and in the pattern of his ministry this clearly found expression in a concern for the little and the least. (The Order

of The Little Brothers and The Little Sisters, as John Mantle points out (Mantle *Britain's First Worker Priests*, page 283) value the word "little".) If we compare this with the exaggerated portraits of Jesus' childhood in some of the apocryphal gospels (e.g. the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*) the contrast is notable in its restraint. An authentic recollection surely informs the early hymnic creed of Philippians 2.5-11 about Jesus' non-elite status, consistent with the story of Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve in Luke 2.41-52, and the summaries of Luke 2.40 and 2.51-52. It is surely significant that according to Luke Jesus spent the last week of his life "every day teaching in the Temple" (Luke 19.47, 21.37-38). In her book *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt explores "the faculty of forgiving" as fundamental to human society in overcoming "the predicament of irreversibility", of being able to undo what has been done. In this she draws attention to Jesus' ethic of forgiveness, and further locates this in his home life at Nazareth. Of course, this may only be speculation, but given its formational significance such an attitude may well have been shaped by Jesus' home life and the pattern of his growing up. Thus, the Catholic devotion to Mary, and indeed to Joseph (cf. Josemaría Escrivá the founder of *Opus Dei*: "Joseph, caring for the child as he had been commanded, made Jesus a craftsman, transmitting his own professional skill to him"), may well hold an historical memory (Luke 2.51b cf. Ann Loades *Grace is not Faceless. Reflections on Mary* page 66ff).

For de Foucauld Nazareth is thus both an actual place and an ideal. It is where we may call our own context a "Nazareth", and how we should conform our lives to the life of Jesus as he was a worker once in that historical Nazareth. It thus reminds us that ministry is always specific i.e. it is exercised in this moment, and in this place, as an experience of Incarnation. At an earlier stage in his life de Foucauld had indeed lived in a tool shed in Nazareth and did manual labour for the Poor Clares who gave him hospitality (page 109). The significance of Jesus at Nazareth was therefore the way de Foucauld wanted to

live, in imitating Jesus in the humble house of that village in Galilee. So he wrote “Love cannot be separated from imitation. The one who loves wants to imitate. ... I didn’t want to imitate his public life and his preaching: so I had to imitate the hidden life of the humble workman at Nazareth” (pages 47-48).

It was de Foucauld himself who also called these the silent years. So he said: “When we wish to convert a soul, we must not preach: we must show our love; only God converts” (page 6). This is indeed comparable no less to Francis of Assisi (page 88) seven centuries earlier who urged his followers to “preach the gospel at all times – and use words when necessary”. (We may note again it was Pope Francis who canonised de Foucauld and who took his own papal name from St. Francis.) The present Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster refers to St. Francis as “a radical saint” (at the opening of an exhibition on Francis at the National Gallery, contemporary with the Coronation), and the same could be said of Charles de Foucauld. Indeed in the book there is a helpful chapter (chapter 8) that explores the parallels between Francis and de Foucauld. Informing their common way of life is a vocation to cultivate the ground where one is (cf. culture as literally “tilling the ground” – pages 13-14). It is to “listen to the life and stories of the people in order to understand and know them” (page 19). Thus listening is not a passive but an intensely engaged process. “It is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensely to cultivate it – to be responsible for it, to respond to it, to attend to it caringly ... To encounter the other meant letting go in order to receive” (page 19). The archaeological evidence from Nazareth suggests Jesus had a devout upbringing (Luke 2.22, 39, 41-42) wherein his eventual mission was one that neither intentionally sought nor avoided engagement with Gentiles. This indicates a ministry that expressed itself in adaptive ways. Although de Foucauld does not use the word “dialogue” (page 33) it characterises his practice and way of life, including identifying and working with the values of the other in conversation. This is his way “to love God with all your heart” and

“to love your neighbour as yourself” as the two greatest commandments. He finds these values of God and neighbour assented to also in Islam (the faith and culture within which he is set), and on one occasion asks a Muslim to pray for him (pages 38-39). Indeed he acknowledges that the piety of Muslims influenced him in his own search to find a personal faith.

For Charles de Foucauld this is a reflection of the Catholic tradition at its deepest, recognising that our diverse paths of faith can be measured by the quality of our service to the weakest. And that on this path we can learn and receive from the other person” (page 38). “Life is a language that one must learn to listen to ... entering into dialogue is accepting the risk that the life of another person questions and changes me” (page 39). He further notes how manual labour leaves time for the soul to pray and meditate ... and it imparts such compassion for the poor, such charity for workers, for labourers” (page 40). This is something also that the worker-priests came to appreciate.

Friendship as mission is not a means to something else but only itself, as the expression of God as Friend to all creation in the incarnate Jesus. Thus for de Foucauld, as for St. Francis, “the Incarnation has its source in the goodness of God, but the most wonderful of all, is the infinite humility that this mystery contains ... God did not need to create, but God created out of love. Creation is an act of love” (page 87). It follows (as Duns Scotus declared) that God would have given the gift of the Incarnation regardless of humanity’s sin and need for redemption (page 87). Is not that awareness itself the foundation of redemption? This appreciation of the divine nature enabled de Foucauld (as Francis of Assisi did in his day with the Sultan Al-Kamal), to engage with Islam (particularly Sufism), assisted by his friend Louis Massignon (page 89); and as Pope Francis did recently with the Grand Imam Al-Tayyeb in their jointly signing the *Document on Human*

*Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* in February 2019 in Abu Dhabi.

From his life and indeed his tragic death (on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1916) in all probability unintentional, there emerged a significant number of monastic groups eager to embody and live out his ideals. Amongst these, as already mentioned, are the Orders of The Little Brothers of Jesus (from 1933) and The Little Sisters of Jesus (from 1939), movements to be found today in almost ninety countries around the world. Their emphasis is on manual labour and service to the poor. This in turn, shaped by de Foucauld's idea of "*la Présence*" at its heart, contributed historically to the emergence of the Worker-Priest movement in France and Belgium and indeed in the UK. He was declared a saint by Pope Francis in May 2022.

De Foucauld chose the Feast of the Visitation (31<sup>st</sup> May) as the patronal feast for the communities he dreamed of founding (page 24ff). The Visitation implies and embodies the going out to others - a characteristic of Christianity (e.g. the Samaritan woman in John 4.7ff who in haste leaves her jar and spontaneously goes to tell those in the village who this Christ truly is, John 4.28-29). We may also notice in the Annunciation stories the repeated mention of "greeting" – the angel greets Mary, Mary greets Elizabeth, with all that follows when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary at Luke 1.40-44. As Mary leaves immediately after the Annunciation to visit Elizabeth we too are taken up into this movement (page 30). So it is that in the Visitation Mary brings Christ silently to Elizabeth by coming right into the house. "Each carries a life that does not belong to her but what each one bears speaks to what is most hidden in the other" (page 26). Such then was the life and witness of St. Charles de Foucauld who indeed sought to be "brother to all". In sum, the book provides an inspirational multi-faceted portrait of an important figure whose life and vision continue to contribute to faith, inter-religious conversation and mission as witness for the church today.

From all of this MSEs (ordained and lay) can continue to draw inspiration. We might note the following especially for ministry at work:

1. Valuing what is hidden in Christian formation and discipleship – what is hidden is probably the largest part of who we are and certainly of God.
2. Remembering that mission is always shaped by context and circumstance.
3. Affirming Creation and Incarnation as God’s free gifts of love at the heart of everything.

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## **International Worker Priest meeting, 2023**

### *Phil Aspinall*

In September, Margaret Trivasse and Phil Aspinall attended the annual Worker Priest conference, which this year was held in Lille - a very accessible location from the UK. It was a very enjoyable weekend, with much time for socialising and shared meals, and it was great to meet up with old friends. We met at the diocesan conference centre, a vast building and former seminary with space for 150 seminarians. Our group of 15 felt rather lost in so great a space. The only other group we encountered was a meeting of the Mission to Workers, but it did involve a chance meeting with the Archbishop of Lille.

There were representatives from 7 regions of Europe: Germany, France, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Catalonia and, of course, England. Only 3 were women. The largest contingent was from France - 7 out of the total of 13 Working Worker Priests (POAP). (There is still a much larger group of the older French PO, but they are now holding conferences separately). The focus of the weekend

was "work" and our theme, the changing face of work as we experience it. We had all been asked to prepare a short paper in advance to explain the context of our current work. The diverse range of employment included: an ambulance driver and paramedic, the Director of a medical/social care facility for people with handicaps, a cattle farmer from the Haute Savoie, Amazon warehouse workers, a home cleaner for the elderly, a counsellor for refugees, a medical delivery service driver, a chef at a hostel for the unemployed, administrator of a community social centre. In addition, there were those who had retired from work in printers, car manufacturers, and a bank.

After a round table where we all expanded on the contributions in our papers, we were all invited to identify a key topic from what we had heard and shared. From the list on the flip-charts, we reduced these to some underlying themes which we explored in small group discussions:

- How to be able to live through and in work?
- "Out of circulation" - how do those outside work get back in?
- The growth of temporary work
- Society has become more complex and more diverse
- Flexibility - opportunity and threat
- Incarnation - what does it mean today in the tradition of Worker Priests?
- The "us" has been replaced by the "me"

On the Saturday afternoon a local Worker Priest joined us to talk about his involvement in the Mission to Workers, and to share his very powerful vision of simply being a presence in the workplace among others. We then had a visit from a group of people engaged in the Magdala Association, a charity devoted to supporting the homeless in Lille. What began as a support to people on the streets, has developed into providing shared housing and ways back into the

habits of work. Two of our visitors spoke enthusiastically about their own journeys and their current work in the association's food truck.

A regular part of these weekends is a time to share news from our regions - the topics were, perhaps inevitably, similar: the rising cost of living, immigration and the rise of the Right. And we also joined in a meditation each morning (we had prepared the prayers for Saturday morning which are translated below), and a Eucharist on Saturday evening prepared by the French (which, as they told us, were very much based on the liturgy we had prepared for the Manchester conference in 2018).

We concluded by committing to another international conference next year in Germany. This has been confirmed for the weekend of the **25th - 27th October 2024 in Herzogenrath, near to Aachen**. Please mark this date in your diary and consider joining us there - you will be stimulated and challenged by this committed group of people!

### **Saturday Morning Prayers for the International Conference**

A reading from Ecclesiastes 2, vv 18 - 23

We pray for those who suffer under the pressures of work:

*Kyrie Kyrie Eleison*

- who work alone, without other human contacts, at home, in small vans

- who are badly paid, on zero-hours contracts, on minimum pay, in insecure work

- those who are not supported, without collective relationships, the forgotten

- the victims of modern slavery and of exploitation

- the unemployed and those who cannot find work

*Kyrie Eleison*

*Silence*

A reading from Matthew 6, vv 32 - 34

We rejoice when we see signs of the Kingdom of God in places of work:

*Laudate Dominum, Laudate Dominum. Omnes Gentes, Alleluia.*

- management who listen and understand the needs and concerns of their staff
- bosses who encourage good relationships with and among their colleagues and show good practice
- colleagues who listen to and support others, and who enjoy in their work
- people who organise together to improve working conditions
- the struggles for human rights in all forms of work worldwide

*Laudate Dominum*

*Silence*

We give thanks to God who blesses us for our work today. Amen.

## Être avec ou être pour?

*Margaret Trivasse*

To be with or to be for the poor and marginalised was the subject of the workshop in which I participated at the Arbeitergeschwister gathering. The discussion was fascinating and thought-provoking. One group member recounted an interview: “Why do you want to do this work?” “Because I want to help people”. “We do not help people; we dwell with them.” This illustrated vividly for me the different approaches to Worker Priest ministry. Do we become one with the poor, living and working in the same conditions or is encountering God in a professional workplace equally valid?

In traditional person-centred counselling training, founded on the work of Carl Rogers, the counsellor is to be alongside the client,

walking in their shoes. To want to “help” someone is frowned upon as being overly hierarchical. The other person in the relationship is a “client” or “service user” and not a “patient”, which implies passivity. I have always seen counselling as an incarnational activity: being with, not judging, unconditionally accepting and believing in the other person. This can feel helpless in the face of immense and complex problems being brought by the other person.

But any pretence of equality is in practice disingenuous: one person does have training and skills and the other is coming for some kind of help. There is an automatic power balance. Those in the working group acknowledged that they were in a different position from homeless or stateless people, however much they wanted to live alongside. Most people at the conference felt they could not describe themselves as “poor” since they had enough to live on.

Some in the group have relinquished professional careers and training to take low-paid employment. This has been the classic Worker Priest model, whether an individual was ordained with this route in mind, such as Tony Williamson, or came to such a decision later after having worked in a parish or professional role. This raises questions for me. If someone is fortunate enough to have benefited from a good education and has the capacity to work in a professional field, is it actually right to take low-paid employment? Setting aside the matter of whether an unskilled person could have taken that job, what about God-given talents and the blessing of having been born into comfortable circumstances? Is there not a duty to use these gifts, to give something back? The Parable of the Talents comes to mind, as does John Wesley’s injunction to earn all one can in order to give all one can. And if one is in a position to help, then surely it is one’s duty so to do? Someone who cannot speak the language or who does not read, for example, cannot complete complex government forms applying for benefits, housing or status.

I wondered whether it was a matter of motivation. Does one person help another in order to feel good themselves, or is it out of a genuine wish to understand fully the nature of their lives and to give the specific assistance which the other requests? Perhaps to see the whole person as God sees them? Our motives will probably always be mixed. Another comment within the gathering as a whole was whether we need to talk about more than “being”; “doing” was important too. To be for means not just being alongside but also activism. The conference in Orsay which started the whole discussion included “lutter avec”, to struggle with.



I admire my European colleagues who have chosen to take manual work in order to live and work alongside the majority of working people. I'm aware that I engage with marginalised people and then go home to a comfortable house where I am not struggling to make ends meet. But I believe in the presence of God in all workplaces and that, at least as far as I can discern, I am in the right place.

## Key points from the 2023 CHRISM AGM

The Annual General Meeting was held 25 June 2023 at Rydal Hall, during the Summer Conference.

- 15 members attended, physically or virtually.
- The meeting heard reports from the Presiding Moderator, Secretary, Membership Secretary and Treasurer.
- Current membership stands at 76 (2 higher than 2022), plus 2 overseas members.
- We continue to hold two face to face events each year: the Summer Conference and the Reflective Weekend in the winter.
- The work of CHRISM also includes: the Ministers at Work Journal; regular theological discussions on Zoom; links with the European Worker Priests; our website and social media.
- Peter Selby will be taking over as Presiding Moderator at the Reflective Weekend in February.
- A survey of members will take place over the next year to help guide future developments.
- Subscriptions for 2024 remain unchanged - £40 p.a. and £25 for students and those who do not pay UK income tax.
- Date of next AGM will be 13 or 14 July 2024 during the CHRISM Summer Conference.

## Congratulations!

CHRISM members and MAW readers will join in congratulating Catherine Binns who is a longstanding member, committee member and former moderator. She was recently installed as Honorary Canon at a service in Manchester Cathedral. This is in well-deserved recognition of her work as Diocesan SSM Officer, Minister in Secular Ministry and, more recently, Hospital Chaplain.

## CHRISM Membership

This is my annual reminder that all membership subscriptions for 2024 are due to be paid on 1st January. The price has been held again this year at £40 for taxpayers and £25 for students (max 3 years) and non-taxpayers. During 2023 we moved our bank account from HSBC to the Co-operative Bank. If you need the new bank details, please contact Sue Cossey (membership secretary) or Rob Fox (treasurer). There are several ways to pay:

- Standing order – we were assured that existing standing orders would transfer, but you may wish to update yours in case.
- GoCardless – this works like a direct debit, and annual payments can be set up. There is a small fee deducted.
- Cheque – payable to Christians in Secular Employment Trust and sent to Sue Cossey with the form.
- Bank transfer.

I would remind everyone to PLEASE complete the membership form enclosed with the journal, or available on the website. It really helps us to keep in touch with members and keep records up to date. We have a number of people still paying standing orders who we've lost contact with and can't track down. The form also updates your consent.

I look forward to hearing from you.

*Sue Cossey,*  
*Membership Secretary*

## **Future Events:**

### **CHRISM Theology Discussion Group - Future Meetings**

This Discussion Group, which is open to all CHRISM members, provides an online forum where we can reflect on and discuss the theological aspects of our work. We meet monthly by Zoom for an hour and a half. Recent topics have included: The Importance of our Work to God and Us, The Idea of Rest, What is Work?, Justice at Work, The Kingdom at Work Project, Eternal Life, Christian Perspectives on Conflict in the Workplace, Organisational values - Help or hindrance to ministry in the workplace?, Is it OK to be ambitious?, Who is Jesus?, and Neighbourliness at Work.

If you are interested in joining the Theology Discussion Group, please email me at [rev.julian.e.blakemore@gmail.com](mailto:rev.julian.e.blakemore@gmail.com) and I will add you to the invitation list so that you receive Zoom links for future meetings.

We look forward to welcoming you.

*Revd Julian Blakemore*

## 2024 Reflective Weekend: 16-18 February 2024 at the Kairos Centre



The Kairos Centre is located in Roehampton, south-west London, and is situated within acres of landscaped gardens and overlooking the historic Richmond Park. Titled "Decisions, decisions ...", across the weekend we will explore and reflect upon the importance of ethical decision-making as MSEs, across the contexts in which we minister. What decisions do we face in our work? How does our ministry inform the decisions we take? Is there always a 'right' decision? How best to communicate decisions?

Guest speakers include: The Rt Reverend and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mulally, DBE, Bishop of London; The Revd Annette Fritze-Shanks, Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ministry; and more!

In the usual format of a relaxing weekend there will be time for both reflective silence and companionship, and the opportunity to explore the area, or have some free time to walk, talk, snooze, reflect, read, pray...

**Cost, from dinner on Friday evening to lunch on Sunday, inclusive: £210** (members and spouses); **£225** (non-members).  
Day / session rates available on application.  
Grants may be available from your Church to help cover the cost – apply now to get their support!

A limited number of bursaries are available to enable attendance; ask us for details or a receipt.

CHRISM can accept payments through GoCardless.

For bookings, reply by post (see flyer or rear inside cover) or email to Rob Fox ([rob.fox36@gmail.com](mailto:rob.fox36@gmail.com)).

For information on travel and facilities please see

<https://www.thekairoscentre.co.uk/>

## **And Finally.....**

At this season of Harvest and Creationtide why not try out this useful resource from the TUC for how to “Go Green at Work.”

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/gogreenatwork.pdf>

CHRISM is on Facebook, ‘Ministers at Work’:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/129656640430436/>

and LinkedIn, at:

<https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=3756477>

# **CHRISM is the National Association of CHRistians In Secular Ministry**

for **all** Christians who see their secular employment as their primary Christian ministry, and for those who support that vision. To further this aim, CHRISM publishes a quarterly Journal, releases occasional papers and organises an annual retreat. Conferences are held regularly and worldwide links pursued.

CHRISM welcomes members, both lay and ordained, from all Christian denominations, encourages them to be active within their own faith communities and to champion ministry in and through secular employment.

If you would like confidential support as an MSE, please contact any member of the Committee. **Further information may be obtained from the Secretary or the Journal Editor.**

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