

+ 2nd before Advent Sung Eucharist Luke 21:5-19
18.11.07

Probably one of Gordon Brown's major tasks is going to be how he steers our country's future relationship with Europe. What we as an independent country can achieve in our modern world on our own and how much we need to be part of a greater whole is as much a crucial question as it was when we first became part of the EEC – and not least because at the end of the day it will affect our livelihoods, it will affect our jobs. Tony Blair had a similarly controversial task at the beginning of his premiership and that was in deciding to rewrite clause 4 of the Labour party constitution – you may have forgotten this now but at the time it caused quite a stir because for labour party stalwarts this was as blasphemous as rewriting the bible. Behind that was the recognition that the work situation then was radically different to what it had been earlier that century – attitudes to work and prospects for work had changed significantly – technological advances, the microchip had taken away the need for mass labour and the advent of more part time working, short term contracts meant the impossibility of ever guaranteeing work for life to anybody ever again. You won't win elections by saying things like that of course but you can ensure your party is not being hampered by outdated labour policies when attempting to adapt accordingly. Work, people's jobs, their livelihoods are crucial issues indeed.

How's this then for an industrial relations policy – “ the men conspire together that no-one of their craft takes less on a day than they agree...and that none of them shall do steady true work which might hinder the earnings of other men of his craft.” That was written in the 14th century by John Wycliffe who is describing his trade union policy. Proclaiming other dangerous heresies such as the right of every Englishman to be able to read the bible in English on his own he became so unpopular with the secular and religious authorities that after his death his writings were ordered to be burned and his bones dug up – so Tony Blair and Gordon Brown beware.

What's interesting is that the main concerns of John Wycliffe are still important concerns today – that nobody should be exploited in their work and that people should not be prevented from working wherever possible. Attitudes to work will change with the times, they have to, and they will be coloured by all sorts of considerations in addition to the two already mentioned – the importance of personal pride integrity and self worth is one, responsibilities to our families, the general standard of living and a realistic minimum wage are two others – but there's also the need to

recognise the importance of having sufficient time for recreational leisure, time for family and friends – and many more but I suspect few people would suggest how our attitude to work needs to be influenced by our Christian faith. But it should – that faith is all important and affects every aspect of our life and faith gone wrong can likewise have grave consequences. St Paul in the second reading this morning was forced to write to some of his recent converts who were expecting the imminent return of the Lord Jesus and so were saying things like what's the point of going to work when the end of the world is just round the corner – Paul had to put them right.

So what is a specifically Christian attitude to work? When we turn to the gospels we see that Jesus' public ministry lasted a mere three years and some scholars think it was even shorter than that. For the whole of his previous life he had worked at home in the family business as a carpenter. It was his previous life at home with family and friends, by being a responsible part of his local community and contributing to its welfare, being a member of the local synagogue where he worshipped faithfully every Sabbath and by working conscientiously at his trade – it was through all this that he was being prepared for the task that lay ahead, for the life God had destined him for. 'Only a carpenter' some were to say later with the assumption that a prophet from God would have a much more exalted pedigree. But this is central to our belief that God has come to live among us and be a part of our lives – he does so in the ordinary things of life not the extraordinary – so all life becomes sacred and so do all occupations. We live in a culture that tends to make comparisons and value judgements about different types of work – belittling some and almost worshipping others – and yet what our faith teaches us is that all human work is sacred. What's important is our attitude to work and the fact that we should do it well rather than in what it actually is.

And also that we remain true to our beliefs at the same time. For many Christians living up to their beliefs at work can be very difficult indeed – in an environment where everybody is expected to cut corners and be on the fiddle because after all nobody will miss it and everybody does it – or where meeting targets means doing others down – or settling for shoddy jobs half completed – or just going along with behaviour and conversations that offend against our religious or ethical sensibilities – standing out and being different takes a good deal of courage.

So being able to do one's work well and to do it without compromising one's faith won't always be easy. There will be times when we get bored or discouraged or made to feel unwelcome and when these times come we need to remember the advice Jesus gives us in today's gospel reading –

‘ your endurance he says will win you your lives.’ In other words in times of difficulty just going along and doing our best even when we don’t feel like it, will be enough. He understands, he was tired too, he was let down as well, he was belittled and made fun of – he became very weary indeed. We just have to remain faithful and carry on regardless. That human work is a noble and an ennobling activity is something that has been recognised down through the centuries and something that many people like John Wyciffe spent their lives fighting for.

So whenever we have an opportunity of standing up for Christian attitudes to work and Christian attitudes at work, no matter how small it may seem we should do what we can – we must stand up and be counted even at the risk or courting unpopularity. Because at the end of the day your endurance will win you your lives.