

Listeners to Radio 4 on 10th May might have heard this insightful “Thought for the Day” about our experience and understanding of work by Revd. Dr. Michael Banner, Dean and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. We are grateful to Michael for granting his permission to reproduce the text on our website.



Work is changing – and not just for the better. The growth of the gig economy and zero hour contracts have created new flexibility – but also insecurity. Emails and mobile phones enable some to work remotely – but can also keep us at work all hours, with no escape from the boss. And automation, which promises to relieve us of certain tedious tasks, poses a threat to the very existence of many regular jobs. According to Matthew Taylor, the head of the Government’s review into workers’ rights and working practices, we need to commit to a good work economy – by which he means an economy in which work is fair and decent, with scope for personal development and fulfilment. Merely having work is not enough he said in a lecture yesterday evening – we need to be concerned for the quality of work.

The very gloomiest verse in the Bible relating to work is probably the one in the book of Genesis when God says to Adam as he is expelled from the Garden of Eden: ‘cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life’. Work, in other words, will not just be work – it will be toil. And that, of course, amounts to a pretty accurate assessment of what most work has been for most people most of the time – sheer drudgery. But this gloomy account of work as often a curse is descriptive not prescriptive – a few books later in the Bible there is found the picturesque injunction, ‘thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn’. And that means that work, even for an ox, should not be unrelenting and fruitless toil.

But can we have a higher aspiration for work than merely that it should not be a curse? Is work something in which we should hope to find fulfillment or is it something from which we should try to escape – when we win the lottery, for example, to mention the most regular fantasy?

In Augustine’s day, a certain brand of monks prided themselves on taking seriously Jesus’s injunction to ‘consider the flowers of the fields, who neither toil nor spin’. So, like the flowers, they neither toiled nor span. Augustine gave them short shrift. He, like nearly all founders of monasteries after him, held that true monks should work for their sustenance. Why? Well, the monks who wanted to renounce work made a mistake – the same sort of mistake as made by other monks who gave up on people and became solitaries, or who practically gave up on food and became rigorous ascetics. They all imagined that they would find blessing by escaping the daily stuff of our everyday lives, when it is, in fact, in this daily stuff that blessing is rightly and properly sought.

So notwithstanding all the gloomy headlines about the world of work, I think Matthew Taylor is right to be telling us not give up on work as a bad job. It is too often a ground for cursing, but work which is fair and decent really could be a source of blessing.