

Back to work

A short reflection for working Christians returning to work
in the New Year



A reflection for a New Year - Matthew 6:25-33

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you - you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Resuming work after the Christmas break evokes a variety of emotions. It may mean the return to an environment that has become damaging and oppressive, one from which the holiday season has been a blessed release. Some might anticipate work as a welcome distraction from loneliness and personal disappointments that come into painful focus at these times of year. For many it will be something in-between, grateful for a break and change of pace but ready to return, with renewed focus and energy, to familiar routines and responsibilities. Whatever our immediate expectations, we will re-engage with a cultural norm that perceives of work as existing primarily as a means of providing for ourselves and those who depend on us; we have mortgages and rents to pay, homes to heat and light, bread to put on the table; few in our society would disagree that before anything else, this is why we work. This individual perspective easily generates the corporate ideology that, first and foremost, it's profit that matters.

Yet the words of Jesus fly in the face of this perspective; he does not dismiss our need for material provision, but challenges us to embrace the values and purposes of his Kingdom above even this. Put my Kingdom first, he argues, and you will not be without these other necessities; and when the two come into conflict, put my Kingdom first. This is a call to faith that strikes at the very heart of our economic philosophies and assumptions.

Writing in the early years after the First World War, an event whose centenary will be marked in this forthcoming year, Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, one of the formative influences in the early years of ICF's existence, spoke passionately of this reality. As people sought to re-build and recover, he argued that so long as material wealth was the primary purpose of industry and commerce - war, poverty, greed and injustice would always prevail. A century later, few could argue that his words did not contain a prophetic edge.

As we return to our collective endeavours, what might it mean to take the words of Jesus into work with us? *"Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things will be added on to you."* This is not to abandon the profit motive, but to focus on principles of justice, righteousness and equity, and to trust God with the financial consequences. At times we may sense that we are victims of others'

obsession with material gain and profit, but we might still determine that within our working lives we will pursue the values that lie at the heart of Christ's Kingdom call. How might our whole experience and understanding of work be transformed if we saw the pursuit of God's Kingdom as being our main reason for being there, whatever form our daily tasks and duties might take?

Where we have influence and control, how might we resist the prevalent thinking of our age, dare to take Jesus at his word, and make the values of God's Kingdom the reference point for our decision making? How different might our world be if the defining purpose of its commercial institutions was to seek, above all other things, the Kingdom of God and his righteousness? An optimistic dream? - perhaps, but there are few times in our history when there has been such clear and unequivocal call across society, for a new narrative and morality within our market places.

Jesus does not condemn or even deny the need for profit, but challenges those who pursue personal gain and economic success at the expense of others. Whatever our role or position, may we find peace, courage and inspiration by engaging in our labours as a people of faith; faith in a God who has called us to place his Kingdom's purpose at the heart of our working lives.

**God of every time and season,
May we dare to dream of your Kingdom's coming,
And may our dreams inspire the realities we pursue.
Help us embrace afresh,
The roles, tasks and challenges of a coming year,
As opportunities to reveal your purpose;
To proclaim your justice;
To pursue your righteousness;
And to strengthen our faith in your promise,
That those who seek your ways
Above the interests of self
Will know the harvest of your blessing.**

AMEN