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*Welcome to Professions of Faith. These notes and reflections are offered as a resource for preachers, leaders and clergy to provide ideas and suggestions for how Sunday worship can relate to the working lives of a congregation. They seek to offer connections between the set lectionary readings for the day and appropriate workplace themes. We recognise that these do not always represent the key thrust of the passages, or indeed the intent of including them within the lectionary schedule. They are offered as a companion for more overtly exegetical and liturgical resources, and while every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of the Biblical references, we can accept no responsibility for errors or omissions, and recommend the use of recognised publications produced for that purpose.*

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## Feb 2nd – Presentation of Jesus in the temple

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**Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40; Psalm 84 or Psalm 24:7-10**

Today is the Christian feast that marks 40 days since Christmas. The set readings reflect the significance of the temple as a place where God's people long to dwell, Mary and Joseph seek the rite of purification, and within its courts Anna and Simeon discover and recognise the coming of God's salvation through the infant Christ. In many ways it is easy to see these events and readings as pointing us away from the everyday world - drawing the reader and the worshipper to find escape and Divine encounter within the confines of God's House.

Yet while this may be true, there is another dynamic within these narratives, reflected particularly by the writer of Hebrews. God has become flesh, he has lived as one of us and entered our world. Although the direction of the Gospel narrative is to journey from the everyday event of childbirth towards a profound spiritual reality of God's salvation - we might also recognise that the foundation of this reality is God entering the everyday. The Salvation of which Simeon speaks might well have been recognised within the temple courts, but the event itself took place in a stable, witnessed by working shepherds, in the midst of the chaos and struggle of everyday circumstances.

A congregation might be invited to perceive of its own worship in a similar way - drawing together in God's House not to escape from the world, but to discern and discover where God's purposes have prevailed within it. In a simple period of reflection, worshippers might be invited to recall the events of their everyday and working lives, to consider where and how God might have been at work through their own experiences. Looking forward to the working week ahead, the words of Hebrews are a significant reminder that Christ is no stranger to any of life's circumstances.

## Feb 9th - Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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**Isaiah 58:1-9a, (9b-12); 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, (13-16); Matthew 5:13-20; Psalm 112:1-9, (10)**

Two poignant phrases stand out in today's Old Testament readings - "you serve your own interest . . . and oppress all your workers." (Isaiah 58:3) and "It is good for them to be generous in lending and to manage their affairs with justice." (Psalm 112:5). The two readings from which these statements come, represent two sides of the same coin - Isaiah challenges God's People for their failure to order society according to God's laws and purpose - the Psalmist anticipates and celebrates an age where this indeed has been embraced. In both cases, an inescapable connection is wrought between the act of worship and the values which the worshippers have pursued within their commercial and economic enterprises.

The New Testament readings at first sight may seem to be less concerned with the business of everyday life, but the Old Testament context forbids any such conclusion. Jesus declares that not one letter of the law will be abolished - issues of trade justice, honest brokering etc. are part and parcel of what he has come to fulfil - these are the practical implications of what it means to be the "Salt of the Earth". Equally as the Apostle Paul articulates

and celebrates the coming of God's Spirit - the Old Testament has already made its point - those who would worship in Spirit and truth, must also be those who embrace the values of God's Kingdom in their daily dealings with others. A congregation might also reflect back to an earlier reading in this lectionary series where Isaiah (ch 42) speaks of God's servant as being anointed by the Spirit that he might bring justice.

The point can be made that while everyone in a congregation may not be employed, every member will engage with the world of work during a typical week. This may be as consumers, clients, service users etc. There is particular opportunity for Christians, as consumers, to question and challenge supply chains of goods and services and to make buying choices in the light of that. These readings might also raise the opportunity to pray for people involved in trade justice, Trades Union staff, negotiators, arbitrators and industrial relations professionals. A congregation might also pray for overseas buyers who often have opportunity to challenge and improve working conditions in developing nations. Prayer might be offered that whatever commercial influence we may have, be it as a consumer or supplier, it might be used well.

## Feb 16<sup>th</sup> - Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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**Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37; Psalm 119:1-8**

Today's readings are laced with challenge. The verses from Deuteronomy are highly structured and formal in style, possibly the text of some form of public ceremony. They are seen as having been written as part of the founding narrative of the nation of Israel; they forge a link between the theoretical ideals of the book of Deuteronomy and the daily lives of her people, who in this ceremony are invited to "choose life" by building a society that is founded on God's laws. Society functions and is structured through people's work - whether those who work in the statutory sector providing public services, governance and order, or those involved in manufacturing, production and industry. To create a society is to create work; for a society to function requires work, and though it might often be rewarded and constrained through economic reward and sanction - in reality work is more than mere wealth creation, it is the necessary building block of human communities. It might reasonably be argued that the entreaty of these closing statements of Deuteronomy is "Go about your work God's way" - and the detail of the narrative that precedes it, certainly engages with many aspects of work and employment. This provides a context for the Psalmist to declare God's blessing on those who respond positively to its challenge. There is also recognition of the human struggle to order our lives as God's word directs - there is grace within the challenge.

There is also perhaps an interesting challenge to the world of business in the words of Jesus, recorded in the Gospel reading - "make your yes, yes and your no, no" In a world of get-out clauses, small-print, mis-selling, sales pressure and the like - it is interesting to consider how much more beneficial things might be if the teaching of Jesus prevailed within our commercial sectors. There is, perhaps, also one simple pointer within these words to how an individual's faith can make a difference in the workplace.

## Feb 23<sup>rd</sup> – Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

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**Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23; Matthew 5:38-48; Psalm 119:33-40**

This week's readings are laced with workplace images, offering plenty of opportunity to consider how the daily tasks and responsibilities of a congregation inform and are informed by a shared faith. Where the workplace is difficult and confrontational, we are nonetheless encouraged to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. Those who work in construction and fabrication might reflect on how God's people are also built into a temple; those who rely on the earth's resources can recognise God as their provider, whether or not his providence is more widely acknowledged.

But the most direct application to the work of work is probably found in the Leviticus passage. A congregation might reflect on what it means to be "holy" - this is a term that often generates images of religious and other-worldly

concerns - yet in this context it is immediately applied to the working practices of an agricultural community. Being holy affects the way people do their jobs; it prompts the harvester to leave the edge crops for the benefit of the less wealthy; it motivates a community to commend fair wages, just treatment of employees and honesty in its trading standards.

This might afford particular opportunity to pray for those involved in trading standards, health and safety, regulatory bodies and other professions that seek to protect the rights of consumers, employees and the like. It might be noted that this is a calling and vocation that is rooted in our Scriptures, and in pursuing it, we reflect the will and purpose of God. The obvious application is to invite every member of a congregation to reflect on the week ahead and consider how their approach to their various roles and tasks will be different because they are a “holy people”

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