

Professions of Faith

Exploring workplace themes in the Revised Common
Lectionary



March 2014

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.

March 2nd – Last Sunday after epiphany

Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9; Psalm 2 (or Psalm 99)

The Old Testament and Gospel readings each recount a mountain top encounter with God - it is this which Peter cites as the foundation of his own message and ministry in the NT Epistle. From these, it is tempting to depict worship as that "mountain top" experience that draws individuals away from the world into God's presence. But while these encounters with God were clearly significant, each has an entirely earthly application - the laws that God gives to Moses engage with and define the everyday life of the emerging Israelite community; Peter and his companions do not remain on the mountain, but this encounter gives meaning and credibility to their earthly message. To a degree, the Psalms offer themselves as a corollary to this argument. Nations and rulers who seek to determine their affairs without reference to God are depicted as futile; whatever earthly leaders might be in place - worshippers are reminded that God is King over all. These readings forge an inseparable connection between the spiritual and the material - the affairs of a nation should not be conducted without reference to God; our worship encounters with God are intended to have bearing and meaning for the everyday lives that we live.

The Old Testament narrative also outlines how Aaron, Hur and the elders remain to deal with any disputes among the people. (An interesting note is that Joshua, the earthly leader, climbs the mountain to seek the presence of God while Aaron, the priestly leader, remains to deal with affairs of state) This highlights that issues of law, the ordering of society etc. are matters of concern to God, which provides the opportunity to recognise and pray for those who work to help and support individuals and communities in dispute and conflict; those who work as legislators; individuals who work in national, regional and local government; those who develop and maintain community infrastructure, work as community leaders etc.

March 9th – First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-17,3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11; Psalm 32

It is difficult to draw any connections to specific professions or workplace contexts from this week's readings. But they present to us a key Biblical theme of fall, redemption and forgiveness. The Scriptures teach us that the fall of humanity has impacted every aspect of our society. Reading through to verse 17 of Genesis 3, reveals that the world of work is one of the first aspects of human existence that is affected by this act of disobedience.

Many will speak of the workplace as a situation of significant temptation, or where they feel trapped in systems and structures which they recognise as wrong, but find it hard not to be drawn into. Some core themes emerge from these readings:

Our faith is founded on the recognition that the world is not perfect and that we do have to live it out in a context that is not fully as God intended.

That in Christ there is forgiveness and renewal through faith.

That even within the limitations of a workplace environment, we can seek to display the attitude and character of a follower of Christ.

That in Christ, God knows what it is to be tempted – we do not serve a God who is indifferent to this reality.

The Gospel reading presents us with a picture of Jesus, at the outset of His earthly ministry, working out the precise nature of His vocation and calling. This serves as a powerful reminder of our call to whole life discipleship. In our working and everyday lives, we are invited to seek God's guiding presence and not simply listen to the loudest or most obvious voices.

Living Christ, in seeking to fulfil that which You recognised as Your calling,
You knew what it was to be enticed by the easy option;
In the depth of personal need, to seek only satisfaction;
In search of popularity, to pursue the spectacular;
With ends to achieve, to grasp the power to make them happen.
But you knew the sound of a deeper voice
Speaking through Word and Spirit
To guide and stay Your hand.

So help us, as we engage in the roles and tasks appointed to us,
To seek your will and purpose in all things.
Protect us from simply seeing the obvious,
Or imagining that our world of work is one that You do not inhabit.
And help us encounter Your Spirit's guiding presence,
That we might fulfil Your Kingdom's purpose.
AMEN

March 16th – Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12:1-4; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17; Psalm 121

One resounding theme through this week's readings is that of trust. Abram is called to abandon the security of the familiar and to place his trust in God, the writer of the Psalm speaks of being able to trust in God's oversight and concern.

In the world of work there are many who "watch over" others. These might be health and safety officers, regulators, security guards, event stewards and many others. This might be an opportunity to explore with a congregation how our lives function by trusting the oversight of others. For example when we board an aeroplane, we trust in the technicians and mechanics who are responsible to have ensured that the craft is air worthy. Through engaging in this way with the world of work, we learn more of what faith and trust is all about. Human beings are made in God's likeness, by trusting and being trusted, we reflect in a small way this aspect of God's nature.

March 23rd – Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42; Psalm 95

The theme of water resonates throughout these readings, rooted in the Old Testament story of God's people in the desert without it. This could naturally lead to inviting a congregation to reflect and pray for those who provide safe water, sewage services etc. in our society. We might also recognise and affirm those who work in the provision of utilities in general. Prayers and reflection might also focus on those parts of the world where

safe water is not available, and those who work to provide it.

Jacob's well provides the location for the Gospel reading which also introduces us to a longstanding racial divide between the Jews and Samaritans. This might prompt us to pray for those who work to promote racial harmony, fight discrimination or work as mediators, negotiators and in other forms of reconciliation. We might also consider how it is often through the world of work that we have become familiar with concepts such as equal opportunity, and reflect on what lessons we, as a community of God's people, might learn from those who have developed and introduced policies and initiatives of this nature.

It is at work that many of us are introduced to people of other races and cultures. Perhaps because of the people we work with directly, or because suppliers, customers and clients are based overseas.

March 30th – Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Psalm 23 is probably the most celebrated and well known of all. Yet in our familiarity we should not lose sight of the underlying principle that David's appreciation and understanding of the nature of God has been enriched through his participation in the world of work. As the passage from 1 Samuel 16 reminds us, David's background was as a shepherd boy. In reflecting on this Psalm, a congregation might usefully consider how participation in the world of work has enriched others' understanding of God. There may be scientists in the congregation whose study of the natural world has given them deeper insights into God the creator; perhaps a midwife or someone who through witnessing the miracle of birth has appreciated more deeply God as the source of life. And of course we should not ignore those who, like David, through living and working on the land have developed a deeper sense of the Divine. A challenge from this Psalm might be to consider how we all might glimpse more of God through participation in everyday life.

The Old Testament Reading presents us with two significant scenarios. The first is of a failing king. This might prompt us to pray for those in authority and leadership, and to recognise the pressures that they can often be under. We might pray for local and national politicians, rulers around the world and those who support and advise them. The second is the call to anoint a new king, and the narrative gives us a brief insight into Samuel's thought process. This might prompt us to pray for those involved in recruitment, selection and careers advice, as well as consider how we seek God's guidance rather than simply our own logic in our Monday to Friday decision making.

The New Testament readings explore the themes of light and darkness. We might reflect on the need for openness and transparency in society, reflecting on those who seek to uncover truth, conduct enquiries etc. The healing of the blind man offers some other obvious workplace themes, those who work with the blind and vision impaired; those who work in healing professions; those who through visual and other disabilities are restricted or discriminated against in the world of work.