



## Faith in the Workplace

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*Genesis 1: 26 – 2: 3 Romans 12*

Good evening and thank you for being here for this lovely service of Choral Evensong in this wonderful place of worship – and thank you to the Chaplain, Revd Kirsty, for this kind invitation to speak tonight on the topic of faith in the workplace as you begin this very interesting series in Lent term on that theme, with some very fascinating and wonderful preachers to follow me...

The topic I have been given by way of introduction to this series is framed as a question – What is faith in the workplace?

My first thought when I read it was something like this: being a person of faith in the workplace is difficult, awkward, sometimes embarrassing – at least, that is a common experience for those I have known who are people of faith engaged in a range of professions from manual labourers and tradespersons, to surgeons and barristers, it can be hard going to be a person of Christian faith in the workplace today (and I expect that will be true of most religious faiths, but I will stick to what I know, which is of course, Christianity).

My sparkling career in the secular workforce, so to speak, before I entered Holy Orders, was greatly varied – I undertook, mostly out of necessity, a range of jobs in different places over the years. I have known also what it is like to be unemployed, when a company I was working for went broke and we all arrived one day to find the doors closed, the business shut down, and with it our jobs and livelihoods.

One of my earliest jobs was as a labourer in an abattoir, which was very unpleasant at times, as were many of my co-workers; later I operated a box making machine on an assembly line, which could be tedious, as could my co-workers. Some nights (I worked mainly the overnight shift) one would hope the machine broke down just so you could call a fitter and turner and have an excuse for some conversation, some human interaction. For some years prior to ordination I worked in a busy importer and exporter, taking phone orders, working the counter and picking orders in the store, and that did allow for a lot of interaction with co-workers and customers.

In most of the places I worked, and certainly the three I have mentioned, I was the only person of Christian faith – at least active and observant Christian faith – in the workplace: there were occasional attenders and sympathisers, and some cultural Christians, but no

other weekly churchgoers, not that I came across anyway, or not any that wanted to admit it in the abattoir or the factory in particular.

This was not unusual to me: I had attended a State school and found among my peers there no other committed churchgoers except for one or two Roman Catholics who were taken weekly to Mass by their parents – this was in the 1980's in Australia. The workplace was no different to this.

What does it mean, then, to be a person of Christian faith in the workplace, and perhaps the only one among your co-workers? I make two observations in my introductory address on this theme.

Firstly, it means most of all – I have found anyway – that you simply be who you are, you can be no other anyway. Our faith as Christians is very much part of who we are, our identity in Christ informs and shapes us as persons and gives us our self-worth, it guides us in our decision making (or ought to, acknowledging we will get things wrong from time to time, why else are we Anglicans always confessing our sins), and it helps us to see others for who they are, as fellow humans being made in the image of God and loved and valued by God. If that doesn't change the way you relate to people and think about them then not much will.

I was quite reticent when working night shift in the factory all those years ago to speak much about matters of faith and belief. I was quite young then; I didn't know much about the Bible or theology. There were good reasons to be quiet and keep a low profile – for one thing, the constant roar of the machines made it hard to hear anyone and we all had ear muffs and safety glasses on. But one day (night actually), it emerged, quite naturally in a conversation in the lunch room about what we were all doing on the weekend, that I would be taking a group of young people on a church-run camp. That prompted one or two attempts at off-colour humour, but mainly disinterest – or so I thought. Some time later, maybe weeks, a co-worker approached me and asked about the church I went to, it emerged he was going through a very ugly divorce, and wanted my prayers for his kids who were caught in the middle of all of the unpleasantness of the relationship break down – he was the first to ask for prayer, but not the last. All I had ever done was to admit, confess if you like, the truth, that I was a Christian, and not just in name or intent, but that I actually practised the faith and took it seriously enough to attend church every Sunday – that was it. I didn't go around being obnoxiously evangelistic, or wear a prominent cross, or give moral lectures, none of that; I simply said who I was and what I did, and suddenly there was faith in that workplace, through me.

Secondly – and this is where I will end these reflections, because most Christians, and most of those in the pews Sunday by Sunday, and I expect most here tonight, will live out their faith from Monday to Friday (if you follow the traditional working week) in workplaces where Christianity is marginal at best, and sometimes scorned and ridiculed, even actively so, or just treated as irrelevant and with indifference, and because for many they may have the same experience as me of being the only person of active and visible Christian faith in that workplace – there's all the more reason, and all the more importance and urgency, to come together Sunday by Sunday to be challenged by the word read and proclaimed, to bend the knee in prayer, to be nurtured by the sacrament and sharpened by our fellowship with one another, then sent out into the world God made and loves, to live and work to his praise and glory.