

MEDICINE OF THE PERSON
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Bible study on “Work, Identity and Health”
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Consider the following letter from a woman who is unemployed: “I get up at 9.30 and take my time going through the bathroom, then have a leisurely breakfast and look at the newspaper. What else is there for me to do? By this time in the morning, my former colleagues will be looking forward to their midday break. But I don’t know how to kill the time: should I sit in an armchair doing nothing, go for a walk, look for work? The mail comes, application refused, no future, no work, no meaning to life, depression”.

Others complain about work in a hard, market-driven society: never-ending overload, harassment. Showing anger might mean losing a job: health problems start to creep in.

These two situations are at opposite ends of the scale. Work and unemployment can both be disturbing experiences. There is some reason to ask “What is the meaning of work?”. The Bible gives us some help: work allows Man to live and to be blessed by God. “You will enjoy the fruit of your labours, you will be happy and prosperous!” says Psalm 128, v. 2. It is by working that Man earns his “daily bread”. Human identity is only made possible through work. This is very clear in Genesis 1 and 2. Since he is created in the image of God, Man has a part in God’s sovereignty over the world. God asks of Man that he use the work of his hands to organise the world in a responsible manner. At the most basic level, work also gives Man a personal *raison d’être*. Work is felt at the same time as both a burden and an obligation. The technicisation and the rationalisation of the modern world of work reinforces this perception. Personal contacts at work may easily be lost, or appear to have no meaning. How can the Bible help us and stimulate us to reflect to some purpose on this?

In Luke 10, 38-42, we see two sisters, Martha and Mary. Jesus goes to their house and they offer him hospitality. While Martha is making sure that everything is being done to make their guest feel welcome, Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and stays there listening to his words. The person and the mystery of his words are more important to her than the obligations of a good hostess. Mary is sensitive to the mystery of their guest. When her sister complains that she is being left to do all the work, Jesus defends Mary: “Only one thing is necessary, Mary has chosen what is best and it shall not be taken away from her”. Martha is so taken up with her preparations and work that she doesn’t even notice that she has made a mistake here. She has surely allowed herself to be taken over by the pressure of her sense of duty, her commitment, and given herself no time to listen and be calm for a while. Luke refers to Jesus as the Divine Traveller who comes to us a stranger, but who always comes back again to Men, to eat and drink with them and offers them the love and goodness of God.

In our busy times, Men, with all their burdens, need always to come back again to a place where they can rest and be themselves. This is why many people today make provision in their demanding work schedule for moments of silence.

The episode of Zacchaeus the tax-collector is another meeting which reflects on work. Zacchaeus the inspector is disliked by the Jews and is rejected by the community of believers because he works with the Roman occupiers. He has cheated his neighbours and now, as a sinner, he is shunned by the people of Jericho. Wealth and power have been the goal of his work. We see he is small in stature, so maybe he has an inferiority complex and has tried to compensate by amassing more and more money. But that has not broken the vicious circle of inferiority, showing off and being rejected; indeed it has made it worse. The more money he earns, the more he is hated and despised. Then he learns that Jesus is coming to Jericho and he feels a strong desire to see this Jesus. So this little man climbs up into a mulberry tree. The Jews considered mulberry trees of so little value, that it was considered dishonourable even to touch them. Zacchaeus drops his mask and shows his real self: the little, despised man who tries to compensate for everything with money. Jesus sees Zacchaeus and invites himself to his home. The Messiah goes to the house of a sinner. The pious cannot understand. Jesus accepts Zacchaeus as he is. He voices no reproach: on the contrary, he invites him to share his meal. This unconditional acceptance changes Zacchaeus. Now he shames the pious ones who have rejected him and judged him until then. "Master, I want to give half of my wealth to the poor and if I have ever asked anyone for too much money, I will give it back four times over". Zacchaeus is once more considered as a human being.

Everyone aspires, like Zacchaeus, to be considered as a person. Some take the wrong road in the process. Recognition and personal identity are not the result of work or surpassing of oneself, or misuse of power, but only of interest in our neighbour in the sense shown by Jesus.

This makes me think back to a lesson in a school for medical auxiliaries, part of my pedagogical work. I had a rather uninterested group; a lot of them were frustrated because they were unemployed. How could I achieve anything with them? After praying a good deal about this, I tried to put myself in their place. I was amazed to see how the ice was broken, and how much they opened up; and how confidence began to grow. This had nothing to do with my method, although of course I did put in some work. I did my best to stimulate these students and bring out the good in them. This is what gives meaning to my work.

In Luke 5, 1-10 we come to the fishermen by the lake of Gennesaret. After preaching, Jesus gives very precise instructions for work: go out into the middle of the lake and let down your nets. Simon replies: "Master, we have worked all night and taken nothing: but now you give the word, I will let down my nets". Simon is brave enough to trust and follow this incomprehensible order. Never would these fishermen normally have hoped to catch anything in the middle of the lake during the day. But an extraordinary event occurs and the nets are so full that other fishermen have to go out to help them. Something which cannot be explained by logic has been accomplished by trust, and the obedience of the fishermen. This encounter also leads to a complete transformation in the nature of the commitment of those who follow Jesus. Simon has no hesitation in leaving his usual work and following Jesus, without asking for any pay.

This last question becomes important when we look at Matthew 20, 1-15: the workers in the vineyard. The master is looking for workers and offers a fixed daily wage. Several times during the day, workers are sought. In the evening, everyone receives what he is owed.

Everyone receives the same amount. This brings out bad tempers, jealousy and discontent. We Men easily become discontented and jealous. Jesus knows what is in our hearts. He recalls his kindness and goodness, which are there for all. Before God, we are not entitled to a salary, but we have his promise of a reward.

Where is the risk for our health? Greek medicine considered the teaching of a healthy way of life as a central part of its role. Bodily health represented the natural extension of intellectual and spiritual life. Doctors were like helmsmen whose sure hand steered humanity through the dangerous waters of life. It was only if we did not follow directions that they had to use their art to cure our illness. Health meant harmony between the body and a way of life adapted to nature. Illness only appeared where there was behaviour contrary to nature. According to Hippocrates, if Man is to enjoy good health, he must take into account not only his body, but also his environment. We must never lose sight of the unity of body and soul. One form of healthy behaviour is the alternation of movement and rest, of work and leisure. St Benedict took up this principle in his Rule and made it the basis of his spiritual teaching. *Ora et labora*, the spiritual combination of prayer and work, became the distinctive feature of Benedictine life. It keeps in view the therapeutic dimension of faith. Spirituality never concerns just the soul and the spirit; it always enfolds the totality of Man. What St Benedict sought to do was to give space for the salvation given by Jesus Christ in a model of life in which bodily health and that of the soul worked in the same way. Medical research has shown that the Benedictine timetable corresponds to our natural biorhythm. This timetable also has a therapeutic effect and makes us perform better. A healthy lifestyle corresponds not only to good division of time but also to the way in which we carry out the essential processes of the day. It allows spiritual growth and has a healing effect on body and soul.

There is no doubt that today, lack of moderation is a determining risk factor. This can be seen not only in the immoderate use of energy which is now beginning to threaten creation, in the unchecked consumption which causes a great number of illnesses and in that excess of work which creates permanent stress, but also in the search for perfection, for complete security, for perfect provision for one's needs, and an absolute guarantee of health and successful mastery of our lives. Political discussions on reform in public health and pensions show to what extent our limits are being reached. Through lack of moderation, Man is led to overwork. He loses the feeling for his limitations and a healthy assessment of himself. This is the Superman myth, man always fit and active. This fiction means that Man often pays the price of total collapse, a sign that he cannot surpass his limits without being punished for it. Under St Benedict's Rule, the focus is on balance. This is particularly important in our times, when it can help to prevent psychosomatic illness. We should not expect to be perfect.

Other risk factors are lack of continuity and instability. If we try to live without external rules, the result is internal disorder. If we have no rituals, if we just obey our desires and our moods, we damage our inner selves. Instability can often be spotted in a lack of continuity. St Benedict prescribes a sound form of internal discipline. A lack of continuity often goes alongside a lack of tradition. We live as though we no longer have roots and therefore there is nothing for anything to grow on. A link to a sound tradition is determining in finding a healthy identity. A tree without roots dries out, a man wastes away. The loss of a sound tradition leads to a crisis of meaning. Viktor Frankl described it this way: "Patients today

typically suffer from a feeling of lack of an unfathomable meaning, and feel that their own being is meaningless”.

St Benedict fights this with the spirituality of faith. God looks at us and speaks to us. God invites us to live: our life is never without meaning. We can experience life and no longer need ask ourselves about its meaning. Faith is the best remedy against our sense of lack of meaning.

An important element here is the course of the liturgical year, with its various festivals. Man is able to master his daily routine by deliberately interspersing it with feast days. Festivals attach him to the roots on which he depends. Celebrating feast days is essential to life: it gives us the strength we need to master our ordinary life. The liturgical year is a cycle of divine life, which gives us the opportunity to introduce a healing influence in all the fields of our daily round.

Work – identity – health are linked to each other.

How do I relate to my work? How do I identify with it? Whether it be in a positive or a negative way, it does have an influence on me and give my life a shape, and also has repercussions on my health. Have these stimuli perhaps helped us to think about it in a new way?

Translation : Patricia Wimberley