

Working it through

Holy week reflections for working people



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ICF - Faith on Monday Morning

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Holy week is an important period in the Christian journey. As Good Friday and Easter Day draw near, many seek to capture the growing sense of anticipation that was very much part of the original events that we remember. This can often be done through organised reflections and retreats, but despite the church's best efforts, it can often be impossible for working people to take this opportunity, as the demands of the workplace, often heightened by a forthcoming holiday break, press upon them.

This resource seeks to address that reality by offering a series of workplace-based reflections that can either be used individually or in a group setting. By highlighting the working lives of a number of original participants in the Holy Week story, it seeks to explore the everyday issues that working people encounter and to recognise how the Easter story speaks into them.

It seeks to offer more than a 10 minute escape into a spiritual oasis, before returning to face the *real world*; and rather recognise that our faith narrative was wrought in that real world, and its consequences are first and foremost to be lived out in it. Our hope is that through these reflections, the everyday events of the workplace will not be seen as somehow *getting in the way* of observing the Christian season, but will become the very things that connect us to it.

Recognising an increasing tendency for Good Friday working, we have included a reflection for this day along with another for Holy Saturday. We recognise that there are many different patterns to the working week, and invite users to adapt it to their own circumstances. The omission of Easter Day is deliberate - not that there will not be significant numbers at work on this day too, but to retain the format of a working week, signifying our commitment to minister to the working lives of Christians.

Our work is one of the key factors that defines the person we are, and if we cannot connect with God in our workplace, or perceive how he is concerned with what goes on there, then our Christian commitment will be lacking a major part of us. We offer this resource to all those who are seeking to live out their faith seven days a week.

Monday The Retailer

Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, " 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.' "
(Matt 21:12-13)

When I was a child, we often sang a hymn "*Tell me the stories of Jesus*" which sought to captivate our young imaginations with the idea of being a part of the Gospel story. The fourth verse begins "*Into the city I'd follow*" and speculates how it might have felt to join in the waving of palm branches and songs of welcome for Jesus when he arrived at Jerusalem. It's fascinating how hindsight places us into the Gospel stories. We are seldom allowed to imagine that had we actually been there, our place in the tableau of Holy Week could have been as a Roman Soldier, a worker for the temple authorities or even one of those money changers or dove sellers who feature so prominently in this particular episode.

Yet they too came face to face with Jesus; they too would have an encounter indelibly etched in their memories, that would not have left them unaffected. They had not come in search of Christ, either to be his follower or to conspire against him, but by simply pursuing their working lives, they momentarily found themselves centre stage in history's greatest drama. Your working day may seem far removed both from the historic events of Holy week, and the myriad of vigils and reflections that churches will hold as you work, but Christ's encounter with the temple traders is a reminder that he can meet us in the most unexpected of circumstances. Pause to remember and acknowledge this - offer today's responsibilities and tasks to God as a situation in which He might be present, and not a distraction or barrier to communion with Him.

Imagine the scene; first arriving in the early morning, the noise of setting up stalls and benches echoing around the empty courtyards; the exchange of news and banter between workmates and competitors. Then the festival crowds begin to gather, and soon there is hardly a moment to think in the heat, dust and lines of waiting customers. Initially the sound of a few dropped coins clattering on the cobbles, the squark of escaping birds would have not seemed



uncommon, but it slowly becomes apparent that more is happening than that; tables turn over, entire stocks are sent flying. Suddenly the trader is confronted with the figure of an outraged stranger and before there is time to plead, reason or even fully absorb what is happening, another stall is destroyed, another working day is ruined, another vendor is confused and angry.

The arrival of Jesus into these working lives did not bring serenity, but disruption, confusion and outrage. Pause to feel that outrage, the indignation of a perfectly respectable occupation being so violently interrupted. While not so dramatic, our working lives will be punctuated with similar unwelcome disruptions; our instinctive reaction will likely be frustration and hostility. Yet in this moment, the traders unexpectedly came face to face with Christ. So in your working day, let the moments that jar – the unwelcome interruptions, the unreasonable requests, the ungracious colleague, the implacable client, take you back for an instant to that moment of confrontation in the marketplace of Jerusalem. Christ does not always come to us in comfortable and easy places.

But Christ does not arrive without words of explanation – he declares the house of prayer to have become a den of thieves. And even though they may have balked at being described as robbers this is what they had unknowingly become. They had robbed the Gentile of the space for prayer, their high prices had robbed the poor of the means to participate in the act of sacrifice that declared the forgiving mercy of God. The traders probably saw themselves as devout followers of the faith, helping to maintain the worship rituals, encouraged by the priests and religious leaders to whom they paid a high price for their pitch. It is easy for us to stand at a distance and see the fault in what they were doing, but they had become so much a part of it, their sensitivity so numbed by routine that it took a dramatic intervention for them to realise. It is a disturbing proposition, but let this story challenge you to invite Christ to scrutinize your working day, to show you the things that familiarity may have blinded you to, and seek his grace to respond.

Gracious God, sometimes the act of love is to chastise and discipline, sometimes the unwelcome and disruptive event is the source of Your speaking. May I be open to hear your voice today, not simply to affirm and leave me undisturbed, but also to challenge and provoke me to change. May those people, situations and events that make my working day more difficult, help me to understand more of you and your purpose for my working life.

Tuesday

The Tenant Farmer

Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. (Matt 21:33-39)

Lest we ever imagine that our working life has no place in this week that we call Holy, we can recognise that it was from the everyday world of work that Jesus drew many images and illustrations. And so this most poignant parable, an indictment on the leadership of an entire nation, begins with the ordinary scene of a working vineyard. The vineyard is a symbol of the nation of Israel, thus the tenant farmers are those to whom God has entrusted the oversight and well-being of his people. But that which began as their responsibility had somehow become perceived as a right, on which they are reluctant to loose their grasp. The fruits of their labour, instead of being willingly offered back to the one on whom the entire enterprise depended, became something to be held on to at any cost. The purpose of their work had become nothing but personal gain.

Browsing recently through the leadership and managements section of my local bookshop, it was notable that half the titles were things like "Becoming an overnight millionaire" ; "Ten steps to wealth". For many of the contributors, good management had no value in its own right, like the vineyard tenants, the reader's motivation was assumed to simply be personal gain. We can sometimes feel trapped by the world of work, caught up in a system that leaves us uncomfortable, yet over which we seem to have no power to change. This story presents to us a situation over which we do have power - the owner of the vineyard did not ask for a change of product or methodology. He simply asked for a change of

perception - one that gave him rightful place, and recognised the capacity for work and production as a gift from him. Take a moment to perceive your working day in the



same way - it might not be easy, but recognise that the whole of life is a gift from God, ask not "What can I gain from this working day?" but "What does God want of me in it?"

Reading the story at a human level, we might suggest that the vineyard owner's actions are naive. Surely he should have recognised that something was wrong and intervened well before it cost the life of his son. But this is not the story of a mere vineyard owner, it is a reflection of the nature of God; this is no expression of God's naivety but the vast extent of his mercy. Yet the mercy of patient invitation is eclipsed as we look deeper into the story's meaning. The death of the son is recognised as Christ's sacrifice for the sins of the world. This is mercy on an unprecedented scale, forging forgiveness for the very act that destroys him, along with every other human shortcoming - a message that is poignantly lifted from story to reality as Jesus cries from the cross "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!"

Where in your workplace journey through Holy Week might you find the opportunity for generosity of spirit; to display the instinct to forgive and think the best of people even in the face of previous failing; to give the benefit of the doubt? This is not a call to blind recklessness, for all its horror, the cross was no mere error of judgement but a pre-meditated act of mercy. In the business world the line between naivety and generosity of spirit can be a fine one, but we should avoid the temptation of playing it safe by displaying suspicion and mistrust. This is an environment that can often crush the human spirit.

We might also argue that this was a story that might have been better not told, for in doing so Jesus incensed the authorities and no doubt hastened his execution. But the way to the cross was already set, and to avoid its shadow would have been a denial of his purpose and identity. We too are called to walk the way of the cross, a road that can be narrow and stoney. Our faith will sometimes demand that we speak words that will not be easy for others to hear, and put integrity before self-interest.

Merciful God, help me to see my work today as something that is entrusted to me by you. May I labour not simply for my own gain and reward, but to glorify and honour you. When that path seems difficult and even, in the eyes of others, reckless, give me the wisdom to make the right choices. Help me to find strength in knowing that you, who in Christ walked the way of the cross, will be beside me as I continue in its path.

Wednesday

The Sex Worker

While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been

sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

It is Luke's account of this story that describes this woman as one of "ill repute". Whether or not she earned her living in this way, she represents those "prostitutes and tax collectors" who Jesus openly declared would enter the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of the religious. We may be surprised and even uncomfortable to find this aspect of the world of work included in our journey through Holy Week, but it is the scandal of her actions that speaks so poignantly. While the disciples rush for the moral high ground and insist the perfume should have been sold for the poor, Jesus places her actions centre stage not simply in the immediate situation but in the over-arching salvation story. She is the one character whose behaviour, for all its scandal, points us to the cross.

This is no polished act of worship or carefully constructed creed, but the raw, unbridled emotion of true devotion and commitment to Christ. In her willingness to break every convention and offend every sensibility, the authenticity of her worship is fully revealed. And so we are reminded that there is no task that we will perform today that simply by its nature can claim not to belong within Holy Week. Its place is defined not by the nature of the outward action, but the spirit of devotion in which it is offered. Some aspects of our working day are beyond our control, but what is not, is the spirit in which we undertake it. Whatever tasks you are faced with today, you are a devoted follower of Christ, you have chosen to remember his journey to Calvary. Offer them therefore in worship to God; believe that the Jesus who could say in the face of an aghast crowd and indignant disciples "this is a beautiful thing" can respond in the same way to your day's offering.



Jesus goes on to describe her as preparing him for death, yet it is highly unlikely that this was ever her intent. Nor can she have realised how immanent the event was, and thus how timely her actions. Jesus does not simply accept this eloquently inarticulate offering of worship, but turns it into a prophetic, Gospel-declaring act; one that will not simply speak to the immediate context, but also have a lasting message "wherever the Gospel is preached in this world." Its origin was simply that she knew no other way of expressing her devotion, but it became something of far greater proportion. As you grasp the breadth of this contrast, offer your working day with the same innocence of intent, and leave it to God to make the same connections; in faith believe that in his hands it can acquire the same timeless value. Give the cross centre stage in your workplace today, not through forceful arguments or lengthy explanations, but by simply giving of your best - breaking open your most precious gifts and letting the fragrance of your devotion fill the air.

This encounter reminds us too of the aspects of our own lives that cause us shame and discomfort. Work can sometimes make us feel compromised, trapped, and complicit in a system that ideally we would want to condemn. We cannot always foresee such implications and it is easy to feel that these are things we must hide, often intensified by the disdain of today's disciples who like those who shared the table with Jesus, prefer the neat and tidy morality of giving the perfume to the poor. But Jesus does not blush or frown - his cross is not the place for the self-righteous but the repentant sinner. Our working day may well connect us with people like this woman - those whose lifestyle, role or actions it would be easy to judge. Let us not be like the disciples who found it easier to define what she *should* have done that to accept what she had. Let the outstretched arms of the crucified Jesus inspire you to welcome, accept and embrace everyone who your working day brings you into contact with. Let the generosity of your welcome and a spirit of understanding be your Holy Week liturgy.

Welcoming God, much of my working life would seem out of place in any liturgy, and never be the substance of a creed. But you do not see the outward action, rather the intent and devotion with which it is offered. So examine my heart, and let my working day be one of integrity and love. May my concern today not be how I appear to others, or even myself, but how you perceive what I do - and believing that you can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, I pray that my words, deeds and attitude might serve as a lasting symbol of your self-giving sacrifice.

Thursday

The Politician

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.

Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

(Matt 22:15-22)

We could choose to reflect on any one of a number of public issues with which Jesus was confronted in the days before his death. Together they paint a picture of mounting political pressure and opposition, while his skilful answers simply add to the frustration and determination of his opponents. The injunction to render to Caesar what is Caesar's is often cited to justify the argument that faith and politics don't mix, but the very fact that Jesus is grappling with such an issue invalidates any such argument. So again we are directed away from any false division between our working lives and the events that define our faith.

The issue was a very real one for the crowds that had gathered to celebrate Passover. This was a festival of national identity, recognising God's deliverance of his people into a promised land. The payment of taxes to Rome was an affront, an implicit recognition that their God-given land was no longer their own. To endorse the payment would have outraged devout Jews, to denounce the tax would have meant inevitable arrest. Our working lives will often confront us with similar dilemmas, forced to choose between the lesser of two evils, struggling to reconcile the integrity of our belief with the responsibilities of our employment. We may long for the wisdom that Jesus demonstrates in this instance, but we can do so with assurance that he understands our

dilemmas. Pause to identify the difficult decisions you will have to make today, the tasks you will undertake with a measure of unease. Offer these to God and seek his presence in them.



Of course this was no simple crisis of conscience or innocent query, but a deliberate trap, and Jesus is quick to expose what lies behind the shallow veneer of their initial flattery. Manipulation can be a vicious weapon in the workplace and too often we can be witnesses or even victims of it. Words that imply one thing yet mean another can easily be used to trap the unwitting customer, or make empty promises to employees. The language of exaggeration seems an almost constant tool of the advertiser, while the fob-off, "the cheque's in the post"; "tell them I'm not here" is an easy temptation to ease us out of difficult situations. In your workplace journey through Holy Week determine to be known for speaking the truth, and let words of deception remind you of the barrage of words with which his opponents sought to undermine Jesus.

Behind this intended trap were the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. It is easy to deduce from the Gospels an impression of these characters as constantly intent on evil. But we do well to remember that their desire was to preserve the religious and national identity of God's people. Jesus words and action were a very real threat to the delicate balance they had achieved between placating the occupying forces of Rome and maintaining a measure of national dignity and identity. Our working lives may also involve us in seeking to maintain such balances - the need to cope with increasing costs without losing customers, to finish the job on time without compromising quality etc. Even though these politicians had an evident religious identity, their preoccupation with the immediate task had made them blind to the fact that God was addressing it before their very eyes.

We often speak of doing things in God's strength and not relying on our own, but this is a principle that belongs as much in the workplace as it does in our church activities. Seek to address today's dilemmas by putting this into practice, and be ready to be surprised by your discoveries of where he is at work already.

All seeing God, may my words be true today in both their meaning and intent. In all that I do, let my motives be honourable and may I never use words to distort reality, promise what I cannot give, or conceal truth. Where I face tough decisions, or am confronted by situations where none of the options are easy, give me wisdom to do what I can, faith to accept what is beyond my control, and grace to accept and learn from those who might perceive things differently.

Friday The Soldier

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Today our thoughts are fixed on the events of the cross - this central act of God's Salvation drama. The Gospel account of the day begins with this savage beating, which is not just a prelude to all that follows, but also enacts the same dynamics of human malice and divine sacrifice that are later displayed at Calvary.

Many and dark are the deeds justified with the claim "I was only doing my job" especially in the theatre of war. Work can easily become the mask behind which we hide when our actions contradict the person we claim to be. To occupation troops, Jesus' crucifixion was just another day's work; another insurgent to be brutalised and mocked to relieve the boredom of a foreign posting. I remember some years ago sitting in stunned silence with fellow travellers in Kosova, having just heard stories of unrepeatable brutality during the recent civil war. Eventually the silence was broken with the inevitable question "How could a human being do such things?" It was a question on which we pondered for some days, eventually reaching the conclusion that no individual could. The stories we had heard were the outcome of a process - an initial act of abuse receiving the implicit approval of colleagues by their failure to restrain; the inevitable pressure of human competition fuelling the urge to outdo one another in scaling new heights of brutality

On another occasion we there was an opportunity to explore with perpetrators why they had allowed themselves to perform such deeds. For many it was the sense of circumstances forcing them to become something they did not really want to be; in another place or another time they would have been as appalled as we were at what had taken place. We can say the same of the soldiers in the guardroom, they had

families; children; and in different circumstances, may have well pleaded that this good and holy man be spared from such an ordeal.



We may not descend to such brutality, but the same dynamics often prevail in our workplaces. The pressure to conform, familiarity and the mantra that “everyone else does it” can blur our sense of morality. A key challenge for working people is whether we allow the job that we do to define the person we are, or whether allow our personal values to determine how we approach our work. Pause for a moment and invite God to show you where you have allowed the values of the workplace to squeeze you into their mould rather than the other way around.

Brutality is also unrestrained when its victim becomes perceived as less than human. For the soldiers in the guardroom, this was not an act of anger but indifference. Their cruelty might be easier to countenance if it was the fists of the Pharisees and High Priests that were raining down on Jesus, fuelled by the misguided outrage, frustration and fear that he had incited within them. But it was not, just a group of soldiers who had no interest in who this man was or what he claimed to be, this was not a person to be afforded dignity and respect, but a prisoner, an outlaw, a statistic in the day’s execution quota. It is too easy to judge an individual by the labels or descriptions that circumstances place upon them.

Engage with this story by refusing to be complicit in any similar process; determine to see not the uniform but the person inside it; to never define someone’s potential by their age, race or gender but by the gifts and talents with which they have been endowed; to measure an individual’s worth not by their place in the organisational hierarchy, but as someone made in God’s image and redeemed through his Calvary sacrifice.

Yet these soldiers, the same men who will drive nails through the flesh of Jesus and fix the gibbet in place, unknowingly become instruments of God’s salvation. The paradox of a Friday we call Good is that God can reclaim the darkest deed for his purposes; not to justify, but to reveal the extent of his redemptive power. So today where your working life confronts you with darkness and despair, whether through indifference or deliberate action, let the cross speak afresh not only of God’s forgiving power but also of his ability to use even our worst for his greater purpose.

Crucified God, help me to see others in the light of your Calvary sacrifice, loved by you and open to your measureless forgiveness. Whatever I do today, may it not be done in indifference to the events of the cross or those for whom they were intended. May its horror constrain me to embrace your values in my dealings with everyone; its sacrifice inspire me to give of my best in your service; its purpose assure me that your Lordship prevails over every aspect of my being.

Saturday

The Security Guard

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disci-

ples may come and steal the body' and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

(Matt 27:62-66)

They may have been the best or worst orders of the day; a chance to enjoy the spring, Mediterranean sunshine away from the noisy hassle of the festival, or a pointless, mind-numbing commission to spend hours guarding a lifeless corpse. We have no idea what was in the thoughts of those tomb sentries, but their working duties reflect how we continue to commemorate these events. Scholars continue to argue over the precise nature and purpose of Christ's "descent into Hell" but what is certain is that while the guards kept their apparently uneventful vigil outside of the tomb, God was invisibly at work within. Holy Saturday is a day for watching and waiting as God's work continues unseen.

Few, if any of us will not have working lives that include a fair measure of mundane or seemingly unnecessary tasks. The quotation that never yields an order; the routine that has to be followed to comply with prescribed regulations, the end of day balance, filing or clearing up. Like the soldiers outside the tomb, we may see these things as "non-events", yet whatever we are pre-occupied with, somewhere and everywhere, God is at work. Pause for a moment to re-embrace this truth.

Yet in reality, as the soldiers dutifully attend to the mundane, God's work is not simply continuing in another place, his greatest act of salvation is being wrought in the very events of which they have become part. This seemingly uneventful task makes them unknowing witnesses to an act of cosmic proportion. Our journey through Holy Week has sought to highlight obvious connections between the contemporary workplace and the historic events that are so central to our faith, but



there will still remain huge areas of our working lives that seem totally unrelated.

This is the challenge of true faith - not to simply recognise the obvious, but to believe that God can be at work in situations where to the human mind it seems impossible; to believe that God can sanctify those tasks that we struggle to relate to his purposes. Today is a day to recognise what we cannot see; for believing what we cannot prove; for offering to God those parts of our working lives that we assume He is least concerned with; to trust that He is invisibly at work in the circumstances of which we are a part.

We might also pause to consider why we sometimes feel that God is absent from our working lives. Again there is rich irony in this story; the soldier's task **is** futile - not because there is no point in keeping watch over a corpse, but because there is absolutely nothing they can do to prevent the impending events from happening. The resurrection power of God will not be stayed even by the troops of the strongest army in the world. The irony builds as we recognise that they were also guarding against the wrong thing. The enemies of Christ had not discounted the possibility of resurrection, but their prejudice had already determined that it would be the resurrection of a deceiver - the danger lay outside of the tomb, in the form of disciples who might steal the body as part of a contrived hoax. The Gospel account goes on to tell us that the guards who were posted to render resurrection impossible, end up being bribed to keep it a secret.

Do we also sometimes fail to see what God is doing through our working lives because we too are looking in the wrong place. We have already determined what is possible and what is not, anticipated God's tactics and then perhaps assumed his absence because he has failed to meet our expectations. If Holy Week teaches us nothing else, it is that God's purposes are neither containable or predictable by human effort.

Lord God, today I offer to you the whole of my working life and particularly those aspects of it that I find mundane and pointless. Give me the faith to believe that you are at work even in those places and situations where I cannot see it. Prevent me from seeking to contain you within my own expectations, and give me a mind that is open to seek your presence in everything. May I judge the worth and potential of every task and situation not on the basis of my own understanding, but in the light of your power and purpose, which death itself could not contain.

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