

## WORKING FOR ONE ANOTHER

**'I Have Come to Do Your Will,  
O God'**  
Hebrews 10:7

Obedience. Service. Dangerous words precisely because they are so often used by those in power to legitimise their power – especially when they can invoke God on their behalf. Doing the will of God is not the same as following orders or even obeying the law. There are situations where we must take a stand: 'We must obey God rather than man'. Nor does doing the will of God mean adopting a subservient attitude. It will just as often mean calling authority to account.

So how do we know what kind of work God is calling us to do and how we are to respond to the particular demands made upon us as part of our work? It may help put us on the right track once we recognise that God's loving will is life-creating and liberating. Therefore, doing God's will means participating in that life-creating and liberating activity.

That means trying to discern that activity as expressed in the changing requirements of the different situations in which we find ourselves and in the growing consciousness we have of our ability to make a difference. This is not just an individual soul-searching exercise. Questions about the work we should be doing are questions that can and should be explored collectively with our fellow Christians and with others who are seeking to be creative and to do justice.

So much for individual behaviour. But there is also a broader social challenge. That is to help ensure that the kind of work that is required by the economic system in which we operate is such that all who go about their labour can be doing so in a framework that is conducive to life-creating and liberating work.

Two such challenges are, first, to ensure that the work which people are being obliged to do in order to make a living is truly useful, and second to ensure that such work is as personal and human as possible. What does that mean in practice?

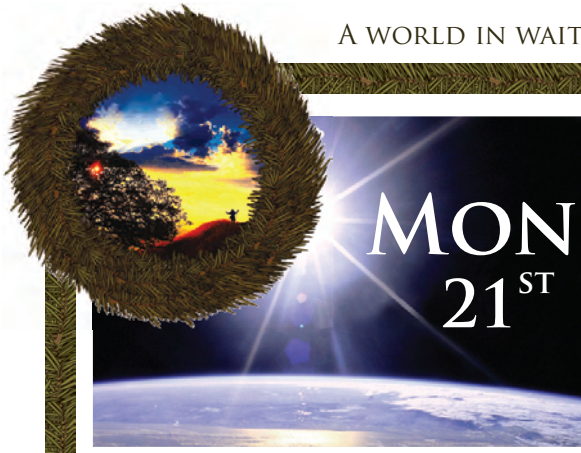
'Useful work versus useless toil' is the oft-quoted title of an address given in 1884 by the socialist designer and writer William Morris: '...there is some labour which is so far from being a blessing that it is a curse,' said Morris, 'that it would be better for the community and for the worker if the latter were to fold his hands and refuse to work, and either die or let us pack him off to the workhouse or prison – which you will. Here, you see, are two kinds of work – one good, the other bad; one not far removed from a blessing, a lightening of life; the other a mere curse, a burden to life. What is the difference between them, then? This: one has hope in it, the other has not. It is manly to do the one kind of work, and manly also to refuse to do the other. What is the nature of the hope which, when it is present in work, makes it worth doing? It is threefold, I think – hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself.'

But is not all paid work 'useful?' Surely if it weren't, people would not pay to have it done – or would they? Useful is not the same as profitable. People will pay for many things which are wasteful in terms of the resources used and destructive in terms of their own and others' well-being.

Conversely, the most useful work may not always be profitable. There is a tension and at times a contradiction. Part of the challenge may be to work for changes in or even of our economic institutions and systems so that there is a more direct link between what is useful and what is profitable.

Besides striving to make work useful, one of the growing challenges of our time is to make work more personal and more human. There are opportunities for introducing the human dimension even under the constraints of today's working environment.

Recently, in a US tax office, a tax official came



out from behind his desk, brought a cup of tea to a confused, elderly 'customer' and sat beside her, taking her patiently through the complex forms. 'I have come to do your will, O God'.

But the demands of our economic system often seem to be pulling in the opposite direction. Labour-intensive work – such as teaching, nursing, providing social care, etc – is expensive. So cutting labour costs are often the first target in making a firm profitable, or even viable.

The result is that more and more everyday aspects of life – from making enquiries over the telephone, to paying our bills, to purchasing a rail ticket – are becoming increasingly depersonalised and handled by the pressing of a button or the clicking of a mouse. Do we really believe that this is the way we want work to be done in the future? Is that what we really want? Do we have any control over such trends? Should we not try to?

If we were to try to change the conditions of work

today we would soon enough encounter opposition. It would not be easy. But it just might be the will of God. Perhaps that is why the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, shortly after citing the passage 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you', goes on to say 'Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered' (Hebrews 5:5-7). Seeking to do the will of God is a learning experience. And the learning can be painful.

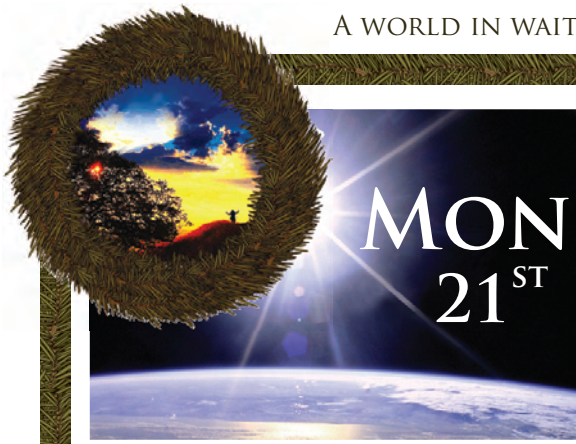
That is what makes the Epistle to the Hebrews such a warm and human letter. It recognises the difficulty and discouragement that can come with trying to do the will of God.

## ACTION

### What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Anti-Slavery International  
<http://www.antislavery.org>





## ALL SHALL WORK

**'A Body You Have Prepared for Me'**

Hebrews 10:5

The Messiah – a carpenter's son? Not exactly what we were waiting for.

The Word incarnate – taking on flesh. And that means weariness as well as energy, sweat and tears as well as comfort and laughter, pain as well as pleasure, hard work as well as leisure: 'A body you have prepared for me'.

The reason Jesus' birth is depicted as having taken place in Bethlehem is that it was the city of David, and the Messiah was to come from the House of David. That is why Matthew's gospel traces Jesus' ancestry through his father, Joseph, back to David (and indeed further back to Abraham). But David, though later a king, also came from a humble background. His work, initially, was as a shepherd.

Jesus' parents both worked. His first disciples were fishers. The great apostle Paul was a tent-maker. He refused to be a burden on those to whom he preached and in so doing gave an example for them to follow: '...we laid down this rule: whoever will not work shall not eat' (II Thessalonians 3:10).

Are we obliged to work? Clearly the duty to work has been part of Christian tradition. It is identified most strongly with the Reformation and its 'Protestant Ethic'. But it is also part of Roman Catholic social doctrine. In the words of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, produced by the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace: 'Work is also an "obligation", that is to say, a duty on the part of man.'

Why is work an obligation? Not just because we need to earn a living. After all some people are so wealthy they do not have to 'earn a living', whilst others may be so infirm that they are virtually barred from the job market. And, in any case, reformers for several decades

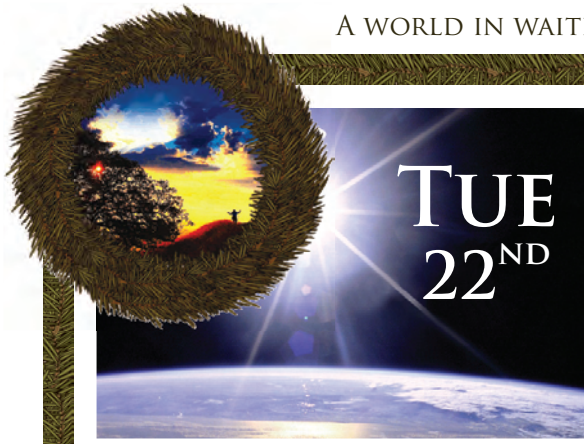
have been arguing that production is now so cheap and affluence so widespread that all should have a right to a 'Basic Income' independent of wages.

But that is to miss the point. The obligation to work is not primarily about paid work. Those who do not need to work for a living are not exempt from the duty to work. Indeed focussing on wages alone can perpetuate the idea – and the reality – that 'work' is something onerous, unsatisfying, harmful to body and soul, and that wages are a sort of compensation. Similarly, the focus on wages for onerous work may reflect the Biblical story of unpleasant work as a punishment for original sin, but it leaves out the rest of the story – that of redemption, by grace, but surely with implications for the world of work.

But, in the present state of our economy, paid work does matter. To pretend that unemployment is not a major problem of our times, with devastating effects on personal, family and community life would be obscene. Some 25 million people in the 30 OECD countries alone are faced with unemployment – no job, no pay, no means to pay the mortgage or feed and clothe the children, no sleep at night.

And even those who are clinging to their jobs are under pressure. According to the 'Keep Britain Working' campaign, 27% of UK workers have had their pay cut, 24% have had their hours reduced and 24% have lost unemployment benefits in the period between September 2008 and May 2009 – and some have suffered all three.

The problem, of course, extends well beyond the UK or the OECD. It's global. And one of the forms it takes is the reduction of remittances to developing countries by migrant workers. These remittances are hugely important. According to the World Bank the remittances to developing countries in 2008 amounted



to \$305 billion – a figure higher than that for private capital flows or for official development aid. Yet, according to the same report, these remittances are likely to have declined by between 7-10% by the end of this year.

So it is imperative to stress, as the churches have done for decades, that there is not just an obligation to work but a right to work. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical published earlier this year, *Caritas in Veritate*, takes it further: ‘Consequently, the market has prompted new forms of competition between States as they seek to attract foreign businesses to set up production centres, by means of a variety of instruments, including favourable fiscal regimes and deregulation of the labour market. These processes have led to a downsizing of social security systems as the price to be paid for seeking greater competitive advantage in the global market, with consequent grave danger for the rights of workers, for fundamental human rights and for the solidarity associated with the traditional forms of the social state.’

The longer term issue is to ensure that work itself is properly valued and rewarded. It is often said that work in the future will be work with the brain – requiring the sharpest of skills in information, communication and productive technology. But separating work with the head from work with the hands is unsound

economically as well as socially. Some of the most basic hands-on work remains the most important and the most satisfying – and should have its proper economic rewards. That includes work in a trade, and caring work.

Signs of a renewal in the importance given to work in a trade – car repair, plumbing, carpentry, etc. – may be seen in the interest generated by Matthew Crawford’s personal story of his move from graduate school to a Washington think-tank to opening his own motorcycle repair shop, in *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work*, published earlier this year. As for the caring work, there are fewer signs of hope. Much is still done by low-paid, over-worked, poorly-housed migrant labour.

We need a major rethink about work. Advent turns our eyes to the future and a day when we may help achieve a liberation of the world of work.

## ACTION

### What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe  
<http://www.ccme.be>





## Worker Participation RESPONSIBILITY AT WORK

Luke 1

Mary participated in the work of liberation and redemption. What a testimony to the dignity of women and of labour. Her consent and collaboration was needed. She accepted the invitation. She was not just following orders.

Does that have anything to say about our economic order? Not directly, of course. But that image of participation in the work of God might at least re-open the question of worker participation in the work of the firm.

‘Re-open’ because it is not new. At the beginning of the last century, there was considerable interest in Protestant ‘Social Gospel’ circles about industrial democracy. And in Roman Catholic social teaching the notion of worker participation has long been advocated. According to the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: ‘The relationship between labour and capital also finds expression when workers participate in ownership, management and profits.’

What resonance does the notion of worker participation have today? Is it an idea whose time has passed? And even if not, is it a notion rooted in continental European culture but foreign to British culture? And, in any case, what is the basis for such a notion and is it really such a good idea?

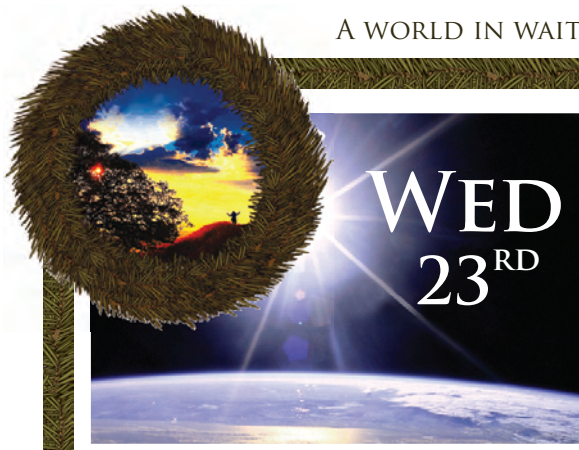
The basis of such thinking was spelt out by Pope John Paul II in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*: ‘...the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a community of persons who in various ways are endeavouring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society...A business cannot be considered only as a “society of capital goods”; it is also a “society of persons” in which people participate in different ways.’

But what does ‘worker participation’ mean? It depends

on what workers, employers and governments want it to mean. It can range from simple, occasional processes of consultation to permanent representation of workers on boards of management to employees’ sharing in the ownership of the firm. More is not necessarily better. The German system of co-determination is one of the most developed, but it has illustrated dangers – in terms of corruption – as well as advantages. Realists see worker participation as a way of managing conflicts rather than eliminating them, since there are inevitably different points of view on workers’ rights (training, pay, working conditions, etc) and workers’ duties (work practices, industrial action, etc) as well as on the extent of the policy committees and boards on which workers should be represented.

Is it alien to Britain? Not necessarily. In Britain a rather ambitious vision was put forward towards the end of the Labour Government in the 1970s in the government-commissioned Bullock Report. The report’s recommendations were adamantly resisted by the employers’ confederation as well as by the trade unions, both of whom saw it as cutting across their power base. The policy of the next Conservative Government was to break trade union power not to work with it. But it was not ruled out by the labour movement. John Monks, former General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress, has said: ‘When I became General Secretary of the TUC in 1993, I put promoting workplace partnership at the centre of the TUC’s programme for the future...It was not original: earlier advocates had included Bill Jordan, John Edmonds, and, I suppose, Eric Hammond...’ In the past few years a modest approach has been taking shape, under the Information and Consultation of Employees Regulation 2004. In firms with over 100 employees, workers can now require the employer to set up a Works Council.

The whole notion of ‘worker participation’ extends beyond the formal structures of Works Councils and



representation on boards. Perhaps the most interesting development is that in the new economy, with the premium given to innovation and flexibility, there are more advantages than ever in engaging workers in the development of new methods of production and new forms of organisation. These are some of the findings in the latest report from the Great Place to Work Institute. What is crucial to making this new partnership work, the Institute finds, is mutual trust – employers must be honest about their company's position and plans, and should adopt a more collaborative form of leadership; employees must be honest about the way they use their new autonomy and flexi-time.

The current economic crisis has opened up serious questions about corporate governance, about the role, competence and qualifications of board members and about the power of shareholders. Missing from much of the discussion is the role of workers. Whose fault is that?

Perhaps the real question is with workers: How much do workers really want to share power and

responsibility, and to be active participants in economic life? How is it possible to ensure that such participation involves real power, that the holders of that power have the necessary competence and that the exercise of that power is properly accountable?

What better time to re-open this debate than now?

## ACTION

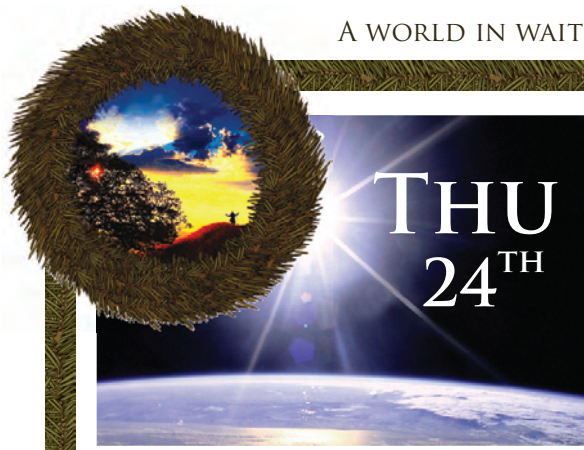
### What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

The European Trade Union Institute website on worker participation  
<http://www.worker-participation.eu>

Great Place to Work Institute UK  
<http://www.greatplacetowork.co.uk>

Church Action on Poverty Participatory Budget Unit  
<http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk/>





Last year the birth rate in the UK was the highest since the 1960s baby boom. We welcome you to our world.

But it will be a mixed welcome. Some see you as helping to defuse the demographic time-bomb as the overall population has become older and there are worries about who will support us. But others see you as increasing the environmental deficit in an overcrowded country and world.

You will be born into a very unequal society. Some of you already have a head-start in life with affluent and well-connected families. Others of you will have to work at it because social mobility has stagnated. But are you likely to succeed, especially if your parent or parents heed the advice of the report published earlier this year by the Cabinet Office, *Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report on Fair Access to the Professions*, which argued that: 'Parental interest in a child's education has four times more influence on attainment by age 16 than does socio-economic background.' But, sorry to say, many of you will be joining the growing number of children (1.9 million as of June this year) who are living in households where no one is in paid employment.

Giving birth is a time of joy and hope, mixed for many with fear and anxiety. Yet even in a time of economic recession we are experiencing such a mini baby-boom that there are increasing worries about adequate places in child care, nurseries and primary education. Perhaps, against the odds, it is hope that triumphs after all. Isn't that the point of the Christmas story – that our Saviour was born in a feeding trough for sheep and cattle? So many of our Christmas hymns and carols stress the fact that Jesus was born in poverty.

But if we think that the point of the story is about making poverty acceptable then we are not really listening. More to the point is that God's son has taken his place with the poor. And that is the direction in which we must move – to be with those who give birth in poverty, with those who give birth in great pain, with those who give birth in refugee camps and those who

## GIVING BIRTH

**'He shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth'**

Micah 5:2-5a

give birth alone, for those born unwanted and unloved, and for those who long to have children but cannot.

And that means working to build a world where giving birth can be a joy for all.

Micah, the outsider, speaks of hope but of hope that requires a fresh start – not from the centres of power in Jerusalem but from little Bethlehem: 'But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days'

Lullay, lullay thou lytil child,  
Sleep and be well still;  
The King of bliss thy father is,  
As it was his will.

This other night I saw a sight,  
A maid a cradle keep:  
'Lullay,' she sung, and said among,  
'Lie still, my child, and sleep.'

'How should I sleep? I may not for weep,  
So sore I am begone:  
Sleep I would; I may not for cold,  
And clothes have I none.

'For Adam's guilt mankind is spilt  
And that me rueth sore;  
For Adam and Eve here shall I live  
Thirty winter and more.'

(15th century English carol).

## ACTION

### What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Medical Emergency Relief International  
<http://www.merlin.org.uk>