

What is work for?

by Peter Sellick



Is work a blessing or a curse? Peter Sellick uses art to explore many themes including human suffering and glorifying God.

Work is a way to experience God. Work offers a rhythm of life, like the liturgy of festivals and the pattern of weekly life in the Torah. Work brings food and comfort, like the promised land ‘flowing with milk and honey’. It teaches about trust and mutual relationships – just as Jesus calls his disciples to use what they have learnt from their fishing business in order to become ‘fishers of people’. Work gives a sense of dignity and worth, in the way that Exodus 25 describes the handiwork in the building of the Ark of the Covenant and the Sanctuary, or as Paul invites us to ‘examine our own achievements’ in Galatians 6:3f.

In some ways, to say that work is a way to meet with God is not a very interesting statement; after all everything we do must be an opportunity to meet God. But it is significant, in that for most people it probably does not feel like a way to meet God. Some people come to church on a Sunday in order to escape work and ‘meet God in worship’. For many people work is an experience of considerable suffering; but numerous stories tell us that God is indeed to be encountered in suffering.

To account satisfactorily for sin and evil can be an enduring mystery. The serpent in the Garden of Eden, whom, presumably, God has created and following whose advice humans enter into toil at work, is characterised in Gen 3:1 as ‘aram in the Hebrew text (usually translated as ‘crafty’) or *phronimotatos* in the Greek Septuagint). That Greek word (usually translated ‘wise’) is the same word that Jesus uses to celebrate the man who builds his house on a rock (Mt 7:24); and to praise his ‘faithful manager’ in the parable of the wise steward (Luke 12:42). If the issue of good and evil is at the heart of the debate about God, and good and evil is central to the debate about work, then perhaps there is a very deep relationship between God and work – as in the story of creation, the very first in the Bible. In English the words ‘crafty’ and ‘craft’ are obviously related, and the NRSV translation uses this word to translate Genesis 3:1.



Salgado, Photograph of Sierra Pelada Gold Mine Brazil, 1986

Sebastião Salgado is a Brazilian documentary photographer who produced *Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age* (1993). His pictures are of work that in many places of the world is still a dangerous, unpleasant experience; and not a matter of choice. Here the worker leaning against the wooden plank and hillside figures going about their daily work, may be a reminder of crucifixion scenes and the passers by.

▶▶ There are some people for whom work is more explicitly connected to God, than for others. For most people the connection is around the values that work brings - and those values have godly overtones. On the other hand, people may describe the experience of unemployment as being 'god-forsaken' and sometimes unemployment is described as being an empty place: perhaps the empty tomb being the only place that is truly god-forsaken.



Paul Bartlett, RBSA, 'Impossible Ivory Tower'

Paul Bartlett's picture portrays his anxiety on entering 'the world of work' after leaving college. The 'porthole' looks as if it has been carved out of a deathly tomb (Jn 20:1?) – perhaps harking at the option of unemployment. But the world of work looks pretty precarious too: the painter looks as if he is about to step backwards and to fall into the surging waves below. The tower is a long way up and in the scheme of the picture the painter is almost crushed at the top of the porthole. The painter is the only figure in the scene, although there is also a tinge of the same red of his clothes in the waves and the pillar on which he stands. He has a sense of command and dignity over his surroundings - although this work output itself does not stand out. The 'impossibility' of the title refers in part to the different angles of perspective: e.g. the angle of the top of the tower does not match the rest of the tower. But the 'impossible' can also be the 'miraculous': perhaps the tower and its height witness to work's importance, despite its risk. In Lk 9:28, Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain top precedes the journey towards his momentous work on the cross.

Mining provides a classic account of implicitly Godly values and Godly effort, and asks questions of modern forms of working. In Northumberland, Woodhorn pit is now closed: it used to be a place of craft and struggle. In the museum built around the pit head of the old ▶▶



Valerie Ganz, *Exchanging Views*, 1985

Mining is a work theme for both art and the Bible (e.g. Job 28): the dangerous struggle to bring to light resources of value. Ganz's picture suggests that that work brings people together: to share the light of each other. Furthermore, the product of mining is something you can hold, feel and put on the fire. It earns (and bakes) our daily bread (Matt 6:11). Some of the values coming out of this labour helped to drive the social strength of mining communities.

- mine in Ashington, an educational resource has been written for children called 'The Making of a Man'. The booklet tells the story of young Ralph getting up at 1:25am to begin his first day down the pit in the early 20th century. He is afraid of the dark and danger, the noise and exhaustion; at the end of the day his dad says, "Whey, Ralph, your mother won't recognise you as the syem (sic) lad... she sent out a boy and there comes home a man!". In the BBC documentary programme 'All Our Working Lives', workers in the chemical industry described their daily life in the 1980s: "Every day was a battle.. but we were all drawn together." "I was so excited to be working in such a big plant.. wow, now I am somebody, I thought". How many people still say these things of their working lives today?

In 2010 Prudential plc attempted the takeover of Asia's AIA financial services company but the attempt was stopped at the last minute. The bid had reportedly cost Prudential £377m - mainly in lawyers' and accountants' fees. Thousands of hours of work were deleted from their computer systems with a few keyboard strokes. The next day the same staff were expected to come into work and start all over again on a new project. How did the lawyers and accountants feel about the value of their work... did they still feel they were 'somebody'?

Today Ashington in Northumberland has a High Street with many empty shops, a leisure centre, country park and newly rebuilt hospital. The council hope to attract new start-up companies to its hi-tech business park near to the old colliery. For those who do have work - whether in the gift shop at the mining museum, or in the small start-up businesses - how many of them feel that their working lives produce a sense of dignity and community? Do we have a vision for work in the future that can help to make its Godly sense?

Work in the past

The great Cathedrals of Europe were the largest works of their time and they were built for the 'Glory of God'. Many early artworks were religious, for devotion: the product of work is both testimony to human effort, and for the greater worship of God.

The hard work by the labourers on the church is matched by the redemption of God. The central stone support for the window and cross emerges from the lower mason back. The arc traced though the King's hand, the lower worker's trowel and the ladder also point to the cross. The King stands against a plain background: perhaps his glory is as nothing compared to the glory of God.



*French King Louis VI (1080-1137)
overseeing the construction of a church
(from the Grandes Chroniques de France 1375-79)*

But the frequent reminders in the Bible about remembering to give thanks to God for fruitful harvests suggest that failure to do this was a common problem. The exhaustion of our labours, and the comfort that can come from success, can distract us from our concern with God. Work can come to be a negative thing in the Bible. In Paul's Epistles 'Works' are those things that are contrasted with 'Faith'. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus calls some followers away from their daily work and exhorts them not to worry about their daily provision, saying: "Consider the lilies of the field... they neither toil nor spin..." (Matt 6:28-9).

God desires of us a fruitful life. 'I shall make you more prosperous than you were before' (Ez 36:11) proclaims Ezekiel's Prophecy to Israel. So God delights when we prosper because of our craft; but that same craft can also lead us into sin. As the Greek word *phronimotatos* (Gen 3:1 LXX, used of the serpent) has both positive ('wise') and negative ('crafty') meanings relating to 'managing', so 'aram (Gen 3:1 Hebrew Text) has both meanings in the Old Testament - e.g. it is used by Saul to describe David in 1 Samuel 23:22 or Proverbs 14:15.



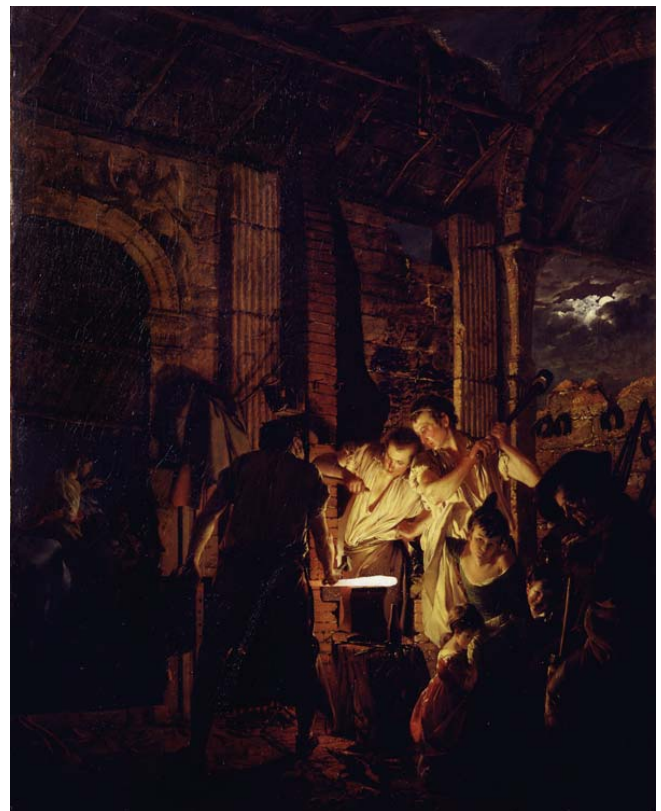


Pieter Bruegel, the Elder; *The Harvesters*, 1565, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Pieter Bruegel’s picture on the theme of harvest both hides and joins the church to the central tree. Is the picture saying that God is implicit in the joy of harvest - or that he is forgotten? The stooks of crops resemble spires and there is a casualness conveyed by the sleeping central figure, the feasting workers and the rich golden sun colour of the crops. The shade provided by the tree/church conveys an atmosphere of safety in the bosom of nature.

▶▶ As well as work being done explicitly for devotional reasons, work can inculcate values in life that concur with Biblical axioms: prosperity, rhythm to life, relationship, dignity, as well as the experience of suffering. But what happens when work itself seems to challenge these explicit theological themes, involves harm to workers or is even engaged in sinful tasks (e.g. making instruments of torture and death)? ▶▶

‘The Blacksmith’s Shop (1771)’ by Joseph Wright of Derby caused a scandal because it made the workplace look like a Nativity scene. Instead of the infant Jesus bringing light into the world, it is a glowing piece of metal that the family are gathered around in the ‘barn’, to which ‘strangers’ are about to come and visit through the open door. The picture suggests that the blacksmith’s shop will change the world for ever - as did Jesus’ birth. The light illuminating the dark world is a piece of iron. In the distance the moon is shining from behind a cloud, perhaps like a host of angels appearing to shepherds below. Light and new creation are themes in Joseph Wright’s other pictures of experiments of the new science. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was described by some as a ‘Hall of Wonders’: workers were beginning to ‘play God’ with creation.



Joseph Wright of Derby:
A Blacksmith's Shop, 1771, Derby Art Gallery

- Indeed the growing industry of the 18th and 19th centuries and scientists ‘playing God’ did lead to more oppression and terrible living conditions for many people. Where was the promised release of captives (Luke 4:18) or Paul’s ‘new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17). Some Christian thinkers could see evidence of the gospel in the potential transformation of peoples’ lifestyles.

On the frame surrounding Ford Maddox Brown’s picture ‘Work’ (1852–63) are written: “I must work while it is day for night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4); “See thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings” (Proverbs 22:29); “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (Gen 3:19); “Neither did we eat any man’s bread for naught but wrought with labour and travail night and day” (2 Thess 3:8). Ford Maddox Brown’s picture praises the value of work.

Thomas Carlyle had written in *Past and Present* (1843), “there is perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in work”. John Ruskin talked of expressive work as being the means by which a ‘working creature’ is ‘made a man’. ‘Blessed is he who has found his work: let him ask no other blessedness’, continues Carlyle. Revd FD Maurice suggested that men could demonstrate their unity with the body of Christ, through their work - as the ‘carpenter’s son’ had done himself. ►►



Ford Maddox Brown: *Work*, 1852-63, Manchester Art Gallery

As well as being about work, Ford Maddox Brown’s picture is a piece of labour-intensive work in itself: maybe the Biblical verses refer to him as well? The central focus is the workmen, bathed in glorious divine sunshine. The alternating lines of arms and shovels create a spiral of movement and regeneration. Their (unlikely) clean clothes and beautiful muscles remind us of classical sculptures: these are heroic men who are bettering their lives through work, compared to the beggar passing on the right side. But the painting acknowledges the disruption to the social order that work is bringing: on the top right a group of workers are demonstrating; and at the top a gentleman and lady on horseback at the rear will not be able to pass. It is thought that the work portrayed was representing the laying of water pipes in Hampstead (T Barringer, *Men at Work* 2005): the disruption is the bringing the water of life through blessed work (cf John 4: Jesus as the water of life).

▶▶ But social improvement was not a possibility for everyone. Some workers would not be able to imagine themselves into Ford Maddox Brown's picture of Hampstead.



In Monet's picture the coal carriers look pitiable compared to the solidity of the bridge, the life of the river and the size of the barges. The thin planks across which they walk suggest their precarious existence. The regular pattern of the thin men marks the repetitiveness of their work: like notes and staves in musical notation. On their backs they are carrying the coal that built and powered the city. They are painted in a similar colour to grey steel spans of the bridge that carry city life across the river, as a reminder of some of the cost of city growth.

Monet, *Coalmen*, 1875, Musée D'Orsay

Work often involves suffering: the crucifixion has been called God's greatest work. In suffering at work, are we encountering some of that crucifixion? Edvard Munch's paintings often deal with the theme of grief and sorrow (the 'Scream' being the most famous). In the 1920's in the light of revolutionary movements around the world, he decided he wanted to turn his attention to the theme of work in a number of large murals in Oslo - as Diego Rivera was doing in Mexico, and numerous Soviet painters. Perhaps work can be honoured by giving suffering dignity? ▶▶



Edvard Munch, *Workers in the Snow* 1913, Munch-museet Oslo

In the *Workers in the Snow*, Munch treats the labourers with dignity despite their precarious social existence: they were day labourers who moved from town to town looking for work. The symmetrical pattern of three with their shovels, the bright light behind them and the outline of a hill behind them may give them a trinitarian symbolism. Or perhaps they are the three people on the cross? Yet the clenched fist of the central standing figure indicates their potential threat too. The pose of the central figure is similar to his 'Self Portrait in Inner Turmoil' of 1920: perhaps Munch the artist recognises the turmoil of being a vagrant worker without security in his own working life.



Vera Mukhina's famous statue for the Soviet pavilion of the 1937 International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Paris reached over 30m tall. The statue bears some similarities to Piero della Francesca's famous resurrection painting. It could also resemble some imaginations of the resurrected 'gardener' in John 20. It represents the courage and success that came out of the hardships of revolution and suffering. The wind is portrayed as battering their upright figures, and they are still balancing somewhat precariously; but they are leaning forward and celebrating their achievements. The man and the woman are holding aloft the tools of their work. They stand out from the base that is remarkably ordinary and squared.

▶▶ Vera Mukhina, *Industrial Worker and Collective Farm Girl*, 1937

What is work for today?

Fordism and Time and Motion studies led to the development of more 'efficient' production lines. In many places of work: jobs were broken down into small repetitive acts that individuals (and latterly machines) took on as their 'task'. In the BBC's 'The British at Work' (2010) documentary, a man who worked in such a place in the 1970's talked of its monotony: 'I stop being a human when I start my working day here.. I only become human again when I go home..'. This sort of work seemed to have lost its sense of dignity, and even relationships at work were breaking down: although the unions were famously powerful, workplaces had very rigid rules and boundaries (e.g. workers' vs. Managers' toilets). For many people work may have become a place for earning money, in order to enjoy non-work time, rather than as a source of sustaining values. In contrast, Jeremiah's vision for the 'return of Israel' is for a time when labour and enjoyment of the fruits of work are held in balance 'once more you will plant vineyards... those who plant will themselves enjoy the fruit themselves' (Jer 31:5). ▶▶



Deineka, *Textile Workers*, 1927

Alexander Deineka's intriguing picture compares life inside the workplace to the young lad driving cattle outside. Inside there is machinery, an electric light bulb and heating: it is warm and the women are wearing thin clothes. But there are also shadows across the faces of the workers. They are so consumed by their work that the facing character is doing the repetitive movements of her work even if some of the machinery on which she is working is not there or not represented: it has become so automatic. In comparison to Munch or Mukhina, the workers have not been given a lot of character or dignity. The women have their backs to each other - there appears not to be much relationship either.

Repeat is what we do when we read the Bible, celebrate liturgy or paint a crucifixion scene onto a cross of wood. Repetition can be good: but it can also be destructive. Andrew Tift painted 'Repeat' onto the panel of a car, after he had spent some time studying metal workers in the Black Country. After all the labourer's work, has he ended up as flat and pressed as body panel? The worker resembles what he is working on: his shiny pate, rounded like the roof of the car, and his eye-glasses like headlamps. The side-on profile prevents us from engaging the worker in relationship. The amber lamp gives us warning?



Andrew Tift, *Repeat*, 1998

▶▶ Perhaps if some people were to describe their work today, it would be to say that they work 'so that other people can earn lots of money'. The economic world is becoming dominated by larger and larger corporations. In many such places people do not feel a sense of loyalty or respect; a decision may be taken in a boardroom in another country that turns life upside down. Jesus was spoken of as a revolutionary against the corrupt colonisers of his era: the Romans and the comfortable Sadducees. What can Jesus do vis-à-vis modern colonials?

Style of work has also changed for many people: from tangibles to intangibles, from production to service. Technology, globalisation and speed of change have meant that some workers have to learn a new 'acrobatics of being': "to make themselves everywhere and nowhere at once; to be adaptive, fluid, risky, de-territorialised" (John Kelsey in Carey Young, 'Incorporated' 2002). 'Immaterial Labour' is a term Hardt and Negri ('Empire', 2000) use to talk about modern work.



Carey Young, *I am a revolutionary*, (Still from video piece), 2001

Carey Young's art practice has engaged with the corporate world. Her piece 'I am a revolutionary' has her being tutored to say those lines by a leading business trainer. She is very exposed in an empty room. Some corporations talk of wanting a 'constant revolution': are their workers being asked 'to create something new out of nothing' (Genesis) - to stay ahead of the game? How can you be taught the line 'I am a revolutionary': is it not something that has to come from the heart? What do these corporate 'revolutionary workers' get out of their work: high salary, some success, or the prestige of working in an important office block?

'Company' and 'corporate' are, originally, theological terms: 'we are one body, because we share in one bread'; 'This is my body' (Mk 14:22: "hoc est corpus meum" (Latin Vulgate translation)). The final question raised by this exploration of art, theology and work is: Do modern corporations and workplaces resemble learning grounds for faithful values, or are they dangerously different? ■

Peter Sellick is a Vicar who combines working with a church on a housing estate on the fringe of West Bromwich, with a ministry in workplaces in the Borough of Sandwell, as part of the BCUM Connecting Church and Economy team. Previously he has been a vicar on housing estates in Leeds. He studied at Oxford and Edinburgh Universities, and has also spent time in Tubingen, Germany, with the Lutheran Church.

