

Bound or Belonging

Phil Jump looks at modern day slavery in a biblical context

Black has very much been the order of the day at this year's big screen award ceremonies as Hollywood A-listers joined the growing protest against sexual harassment and exploitation in their particular workplace. This was the latest response to a catalogue of claims and accusations triggered by initial revelations about the behaviour of Miramax producer Harvey Weinstein.

Stories like this raise significant and disturbing questions about the nature of society as a whole, but also reflect some unavoidable realities about participation in the world of work. What has particularly caused outrage is the way in which workplace cultures and structures made it difficult for people to openly challenge what was happening, or convinced certain individuals that they had a right to act in ways that would be unthinkable in any other context.

No-one would deny that it is utterly wrong for any human being, male or female, to be placed in a situation where they feel somehow compelled to accept behaviours and advances that are so unwelcome and deplorable. But why is it that workplaces in particular seem to create such realities?

The two might not initially seem related, but it was while this storm was raging, that I found myself in a management discussion about "intellectual property". The concern was that employees who had been paid to develop a particular suite of resources could not fully claim these as their own, because they had been operating at the time under the auspices of their employer. The organisation in question would be considered unquestionably honourable, yet the conversation

still veered towards assessing people, their time, talents and attributes in terms of them being property that potentially belonged to someone else. I could not help but sense a chilling parallel with some of the narratives that have emerged from the Weinstein scandal about the way in which young, attractive and aspiring actors were considered to be the "property" of those with the power to make them famous.

And while we might rightly protest at such ideas, the reality remains that workplaces often rely on being locations where people are willing to do things that they might otherwise not. Most of the time, this will be nothing more innocuous than putting up with tasks that are mundane and repetitive because it "pays the bills", wearing a suit when we would probably be more comfortable sporting a baggy jumper and a pair of jeans, or dragging ourselves out of bed when we would rather stay put for another hour or so. Work inevitably exposes us to a level of compliance to which we surrender a measure of free will in return for suitable remuneration, or perhaps out of a basic loyalty to the organisation of which we are a part.

And even if we promote work as an end in itself rather than a means of economic gain, it is still able to exercise control over us. The keen gardener is unlikely to relish the task of weeding, or the back-breaking slog of double digging, but will be willing to put up with it for the sake of the eventual results later in the growing season. And here we return to the basic dynamic of employment – if I find such tasks sufficiently monotonous or beyond my physical

capability, I can pay another human being to undertake them for me. Work creates an environment where lots of people do what they ordinarily wouldn't do.

Where then does the boundary lie between this basic dynamic of human enterprise and the abuse and exploitation that are now being exposed? But before considering that, I want to highlight another aspect of this reality that appears as widespread, but does not have its celebrity survivors to stand up and speak against it.

The umbrella term "Modern Day Slavery" is one that is applied to the plight of an estimated 40 million people around the world. Its forms vary from migrant workers held in economic servitude and people

tricked into being trafficked for sexual exploitation to women forced into marriages without consent. One in four people held in its grip are believed to be children and the UK and other western nations are being increasingly recognised as places where such practices prevail¹.

Much is being done to combat this widespread evil, with recent legislation requiring any UK company with annual revenues of £36 million or more to report on the transparency of their supply chains in relation to slavery and forced labour. This is to be commended, along with initiatives supported by faith groups and others to identify and expose modern slavery whenever it is found.

Yet we cannot escape the reality that work, the need of work, the offer of work and the potential rewards of work seem to be key instruments in

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