

# A Theology of Redeployment

*Steve Apted looks at the change already brought about by the pandemic, and then takes us through his own experiences of three redundancies, and his relationship with God through each of them. Using Jesus' own words, plus psalms and proverbs, he proposes a theology of redeployment rather than redundancy, based on Jesus pruning his vine, and the cures for despondency in the proverbs and the psalms.*

*'There are decades when nothing happens: and there are weeks when decades happen'*  
Vladimir Ilyich 'Lenin' (1870-1924)

'Revolution' (from the Latin *revolutio*, "a turnaround") can be defined as "a significant change that usually occurs in a short period of time". There is little doubt that what we have experienced since 23rd March 2020 may justifiably be called revolutionary. Living through revolutionary history is much harder than simply reading about it in history books or the Bible. The birth of Christianity itself 2000 years ago is the biggest revolution the world has ever seen, as Tom Holland's latest book *Revolutionary* (SPCK) attests.

The coronavirus crisis is being seen as the most significant event to have occurred globally since the end of World War Two. Of the many structural changes that have taken place some will prove to be temporary or partial whilst others will prove to be permanent and pervasive. Historically this event will be a point used to measure the world pre-Covid and post-Covid in the way that 'pre-1939' and 'post-1945' have been used to define eras and the turning of the pages of history. The Spanish flu of 1918 might have been one such marker had it not been overshadowed by the Great War. The epidemic was a much greater killer than the war itself and far more indiscriminate. The pandemic will

require us to change and adapt to the new world that emerges post-Covid 19 on a scale much more significant than simply a response to a global medical emergency:

*The current coronavirus outbreak is the biggest challenge for the world since World War Two, UN Secretary General António Guterres has warned. He said it could bring a recession "that probably has no parallel in the recent past".<sup>1</sup>*

*"For some organizations, near-term survival is the only agenda item. Others are peering through the fog of uncertainty, thinking about how to position themselves once the crisis has passed and things return to normal.*



**Structural changes**

Photo: The Telegraph

*The question is, 'What will normal look like?' While no one can say how long the crisis will last, what we find on the other side will not look like the normal of recent years".<sup>2</sup>*

Structural changes in technology and consumer behaviour and preferences were already taking place in many industries and sectors, but Covid has massively accelerated structural change. Company boardrooms, business owners, managers and employees are all in their own ways wrestling with this and seeking to come to terms with it.

## **Not Everything Faced Can Be Changed**

Many of the recent changes have been for the good. The way that the big pharma companies have collaborated on vaccine research; drug trials that normally take years have been completed safely in months. There has been long overdue recognition of many low-paid key workers in healthcare, social care, transport and distribution. There has been a massive surge in community spirit at the micro-level, as neighbours have supported one another through shopping and many other instances of kindness and mutual help. Hospitality companies have donated to foodbanks millions of pounds of surplus produce that they were unable to sell, and found new levels of corporate generosity even in the face of their own lost profits.

Some elements of society will inevitably revert to the way life was before 23rd March 2020. Church life is now resuming albeit with limitations and reduced programmes. Coffee shops and restaurants are partially open and theatres, cinemas, sporting events, music festivals and concerts anticipate opening, hopefully later in the year. Some things however will have permanently changed. The number of employees working from home is likely to remain much higher than before lockdown. The use of video conferencing for a whole range of communicating is here to stay and the trend away from bricks and mortar retailing to online has

accelerated rapidly and is unlikely to be reversed.

*"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."*

James Baldwin (1924-1987)

Inevitably restructuring arising from the accelerated reliance on the digital and online world will lead to a loss of jobs but also result in the creation of new ones. As the wider world of high street retail has shrunk and given way to the digital space there has been a massive expansion of warehousing, distribution and jobs requiring digital skills. This is a very different world from being front of house in a shop dealing with walk-in customers and requires different skills, but these structural changes are creating new jobs and opportunities, nevertheless. The high street is one very visible sector that is changing before our eyes as gaps left by Peacocks, Arcadia, House of Fraser and Debenhams all appear and other chains like M&S, John Lewis and Next scale back their presence.

## **No Sacred/Secular Divides in God's Economy**

How do we face these challenges either as Christian leaders, managers, shareholders, business owners, and/or employees, in both the 'for Profit', 'not for Profit' and third sectors? How do we respond to the painful employment decisions that we may be forced to make and how do we face being on the receiving end? I approach this as someone who has been made redundant three times (so far!) in my career and has also faced the pain - even in this pandemic - of needing to determine with others which roles can be retained, and which will need to end.

Having passed through three redundancy experiences I found each

instance to be quite unique, although some common lessons can be learnt. On the first occasion, in my mid-30s, I only had an inkling 24 hours beforehand that something was about to happen. The formal meeting on a Friday morning to commence the at-risk consultation process therefore came as a big shock. I had however been actively thinking and praying about a change of employment. On the following Saturday morning I reminded the Lord that I had been

## **'How do we respond to the painful employment decisions that we may be forced to make and how do we face being on the receiving end?'**

seeking him for my next job move and now that move was being brought about by forces beyond my control. I had contacted a few friends on Friday afternoon to inform them of what was happening. By Sunday evening I had a call back advising me of a potential new job. By Wednesday of the following week an interview had been

arranged and within 10 days I had a new job confirmed on a higher salary before finalisation of the severance package at my old company had been completed.

In the second instance, in my late forties, I had been living with a growing sense of conviction that I was being called to work in Christian publishing. After a complicated series of 'God-instances' I was offered a role which, whilst very attractive as an opportunity to serve as a functional director and Executive team member in an international Christian publishing organisation, offered a salary significantly lower than the one I enjoyed in my secular management position. I spent two years actively praying to be made redundant to ensure a financial parachute that would enable me to take a significant drop in pay. Odd as it may sound, actually waiting for two years to be made redundant was the most frustrating of the three redundancy episodes. I wrote a letter of resignation at one point and carried it in my briefcase although I didn't have the sense of liberty to hand it in.

## Redundancy

Photo: Hans Schumann



The Christian publishing organisation keen for me to join graciously kept the role open for me for those two years. Following the sought-after redundancy I then joined them for a few challenging but deeply fulfilling years. Sadly, following the 2008 international banking crisis leading to a global recession and the exponential growth of Amazon, a dramatic downsizing in Christian publishing and retail in both the UK and USA was required. I recognised that I would need to leave the organisation in order to reduce operational overheads and ensure that others less able to find alternative work could continue in a significantly downsized structure. Providentially a door was opened when one of my old bosses phoned me out of the blue to talk about a role he was trying to fill and asking if I was interested. The Lord's hand was clearly in this change of role once again.

After a few years back in the 'for profit' business world working in a privately

owned company I experienced my third redundancy. This arrived in my early 50s and led me to start my own limited company working as a consultant and interim manager in both secular and Christian organisations for a few years, before finding my current employer, the Salvation Army.

There are no career paths anymore. It is all crazy paving and as Christians we have to pray and trust the Lord as he lays it before us one block at a time. Whatever the nature of the organisation we may find ourselves working in, we are on a journey of faith and trust in the Lord. As Christians we live by faith and not by sight just as much as missionaries who have no salary and pray in their money, relying on the faithfulness of believers.

Key lessons I would draw from my experiences are first of all 'don't panic'. God has purposes and plans for each life and we need to give time and space for these to be worked out. We should

try to avoid a rigidity of thinking about what the next role should look like, where it should be located or how much it should pay. The Lord is a lot more courageous and radical than us and he is often quite willing to gently push us across our own so-called 'red lines' where change seems too radical to contemplate. The Lord is also gracious. In my own situation, due to complicated support needs for various family members both old and young, a physical house move would have been very hard. This did however involve me in weekly commutes over the last 13 years to Carlisle, Nottingham, Harlow and central London from Bedfordshire.

There is no stigma to unemployment. But our personal sense of self-worth, identity and value to society are so often valued by what we do for a living. How deeply this permeates our thinking can be exposed in the loss of a job. I hit a personal low spot when I handed in my company car following my third redundancy and it exposed a love of

status and position that the Lord wanted to uncover in my life. The third period of redundancy was the only one of the three where I had no idea what I would do next. This lasted for a period from August to December. I joined an Executive job club that met regularly at a local college. This was a huge support and one I deeply valued. After discovering my next move I sought to put something back into the group.

Having briefly shared my personal experiences, I would like to tentatively explore some ideas around what may be described as a theology of redeployment rather than a theology of redundancy. The word 'redundancy' is heavily freighted with a sense of ending, termination of purpose and role. For many it can carry a sense of hopelessness and personal worthlessness with it.

First, there are no redundancies in God's kingdom, but he does move his disciples around to create new areas of ministry and fruitfulness: hence the use of the word 'redeployment'. Christian believers who have either been made redundant or who fear it may happen need the assurance that whilst their role may have been declared redundant, they as children of a faithful heavenly Father most certainly are not.

The Lord has ongoing purposes for all organisations, the way that they are run, and their ultimate destiny. It is easy to subconsciously fall into the trap of thinking that God is only interested in the purposes and futures of churches and Christian charities and organisations. It is our artificial thinking that creates the sacred/secular divide that we need to continually resist. We need to encourage all working in the corporate world at whatever level of responsibility to be actively praying for the organisations they are involved with - the future of these organisations, their challenges and the choices that their leaders are faced with making as a result of the pandemic.

Many workers will never meet the men and women who hold their future employment in their hands. Global leaders may be in another part of the world and be the nameless and faceless boards of investment banks, private equity houses or hedge funds. Whoever they are, however, they are known to God and he has an interest in what they are doing and thinking. We need to pray for those who may be impacted.

On the other hand, some reading this may be among the unseen ones whose decisions impact employment prospects of colleagues whom

they have never met. Voting as shareholders can also have similar consequences and such decision-making can feel even more remote and disconnected from the reality of people's everyday lives. Organisations may be making Procurement and Supply Chain decisions that will affect the employment prospects of those in other allied industries in other parts of the world, the consequences of which may be unseen but are very real and profound in the lives of the many affected by those decisions.

## Whatever Your Hand Finds To Do (Ecclesiastes 9.10)

The result of a redundancy decision - for many because of the pandemic - may mean that the change of circumstances is a time of pruning to prepare for greater fruitfulness. If we personally are involved or have the oversight or fellowship with believers facing such times, then there may be value in meditating on John 15 and what the Lord might want to say through those verses - both to individuals and also to organisations facing profound change.

*'I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful'*

John 15:1-2



**Fruitfulness after pruning: John Lewis newly refurbished Edinburgh store after 17 store closures**

Photo: John Lewis

A couple of verses that have spoken deeply to me during periods of redeployment, awaiting what the Lord has for me next, have been:

*Wait for the Lord  
Be strong and take heart  
And wait for the Lord*  
Psalm 27:14  
*Why do you complain, Jacob?  
Why do you say Israel,  
My way is hidden from the Lord;*  
Isaiah 40:27

To anyone facing redundancy as a result of the pandemic I would say: Don't become discouraged if there is a pause between assignments. The period of reflection and waiting is an essential element of the pruning process and preparing us for what comes next. It can't be rushed and the Lord knows what he is doing in each person's life. All our work when given to God - whether in a Christian or secular organisation - reflects God's call for us to serve him. It is important to remain open to whatever comes next. Again, both as individuals and from an organisational perspective we should not despise or overlook a new opportunity that might be presenting itself, even if it is not one that has ever been imagined or desired before.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 reminds us:

*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.*

Zechariah 4:10:

*Who dares despise the day of small things?*

Colossians 3:23:

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.*

I am reminded in this post - Easter period and pre-Pentecost period (called The Great Lord's Day) in which I write this article that the disciples returned

to their fishing nets for a short duration after the crucifixion. This was not something they had imagined would ever happen or sought but it was a productive and useful interlude for them to earn a living. It gave them a time to reflect on the events of the last three years and unbeknown to them was a period of preparation for the tumultuous times ahead. They could never imagine at that point what was just around the corner following the day of Pentecost and their subsequent lives afterwards. Days of despondency and a deep sense of loss led to the blossoming of new and fruitful service beyond their wildest dreams. The attitude we find in our hearts and how we respond during these periods of pause and waiting can be crucial in our preparedness for the next step. It may not result in a restoration of the salary, leadership status, influence or worldly authority experienced in earlier roles but this does not in anyway detract from the service or fruitfulness that may be found in other spheres of work if our heart attitudes are right. Proverbs 3:23 reminds us: *'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it'*.

## Plans Fail for Lack of Counsel (Proverbs 15:22)

For those faced with the hard choices of having to declare roles redundant in organisations, they may be well supported with HR and employment law specialists to advise on all HR and employment law due process in staff consultations. Some may have been through the process in the past, working on large-scale restructurings affecting dozens or even hundreds of jobs in the UK and overseas. There may however be others in SMEs without that level of experience or corporate

expertise readily on tap. Whatever the situation, working hard to communicate as compassionately and as clearly with all staff as much as possible is vital. When redundancy is looming staff will often ask what is likely to happen to their jobs. This can be a difficult question to answer as there are often discussions taking place behind the scenes with boards, shareholders, investors and/or owners that cannot be disclosed. A good maxim is to try to share as much as possible as soon as possible without compromising either individuals or the organisation. There are times when confidentiality needs to be maintained and there are also times when staff need to be admitted into the circle of trust. Discernment about which of those times organisations are facing is important. For those who have never been faced with the pain of letting staff go then seeking out someone with more experience in this area, who can provide advice about how to structure difficult conversations, can be useful. Do ensure that the most up-to-date legal advice is taken and be willing to pay for it - this is crucial.

In many organisations the wage bill is the highest cost. No one wants to make staff redundant but delaying the inevitable could lead to the whole organisation being put at risk. Staff being made redundant need emotional support and time to process the changes they and their families are facing. Just because a role ends in redundancy does not mean that the role has not been valued in the months and years gone by. Times of reflection and celebration over all that has been achieved in the organisation are important. It isn't the end of God's call on the lives of those leaving the organisation, but a time to seek the next step, hopefully leading to greater fruitfulness. 🙏

1. McKinsey: The future is not what it used to be: Thoughts on the shape of the next normal. April 2020
2. BBC News website 1st April 2020



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