

**Introduction and forging connection**

**My/our experiences of work**

The four letter word of Maynard G Crebbs  
Work! Where work was, M G Crebbs didn't want to be.

What do you think of when you think of "work"?

Over the past two centuries, "work" has come to be equated with a paid job. This has had an earthquake-like effect on how people think and feel about themselves. It has been very damaging for us, producing workaholics, and many who are overworked. It has produced emotional and spiritual and social hardship to the unemployed, the retired, to women as homemakers and carers, to children, to the differently abled.

A christian understanding of work is that work isn't simply paid work.

Work includes any productive activity.

John Stott, well known christian writer and preacher defines work this way:

*Work is any expenditure of energy in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the doer, benefit to the community, and glory to God.*

"Work" isn't simply paid work: work goes to the heart of all life

Whether you're in paid work, retired, unemployed, underemployed, in training, a volunteer or an unpaid full time carer...

This series is for you, this series is about you

**Part 1 God the worker**

**The theological issue of images: ie metaphors, analogies, correspondences**

God the worker

Word pictures

Provisional, incomplete

None absolute, no one the fullness of the glory of God

Guiding lights, pointers, part of the mosaic pavement which point the way to our experiencing God in new and deeper ways

A journey into the heart and the hands of God

Where is God at work?

Not confined to heaven  
Not confined to temple  
Not confined to Israel and the borders of the land

God is always breaking open,  
God is the boundary rider, always seeking to reclaim the creation which is his  
*Quote—Israel's God neither slumbers nor sleeps*  
Or again *the heavens and the earth, the work of your fingers, give forth praise*  
*(present continuous tense). Plus John 5*

The work of God

The familiar images of Father, Lord, King  
Images of distinctiveness, Saviour/saved, Redeemer/redeemed, Judge  
Images of separation: God's transcendence, our dependency  
Ecclesiastes: **God** is in heaven, **you** are on earth.

*These are Images of distance (gesture)*

**But...**there is more to the story of God the worker

Banks says there is no aspect of Israel's daily life and work where God the worker is absent.

What follows today is images which may be unfamiliar, God as potter, lover, farmer, weaver, artist, camper  
What follows today is images of closeness  
It is a theology of work as *Emmanuel*: God with us and God for us  
It is a sharing of God the worker with our daily work,  
Our lived humanity in all its fullness

It is not so much images of distance,  
As of relationship,  
Of deep connection  
Of the God of heaven-with-us.

*Cruciform hand gesture, the cross of the open arms, the open hands of God*

## **Our narrative of work**

The Bible doesn't make the kinds of distinctions we make about work. In her Millar's tale, Francis reminds us that work is not simply a paid job.

But as believers we follow another story

1. we are all workers
2. there is no aspect of our daily life or work from which God is excluded
3. the work of God and our work are interlinked, like two hands clasped together

*Clasp hands*

We begin by turning our attention to God.

By experiencing God as God the worker,  
Banks in *God the worker* says we will enter in new ways into the heart of  
God's own divine life.

Where to begin? At the beginning. God the designer, God the artist extraordinaire,  
God the potter.

### **Creation theology: work as created, commanded, blessed and sustained by the Creator**

#### **This...**

From the very beginning, Genesis 1, we see God at work  
God the designer, God the maker, God the master craftsman  
The voice of God has the power to create  
God speaks and it is so.

It is by the decree of God that chaos is separated from order  
By God's word and hand, time and matter are created and filled with teeming life  
It is through the command of God that all that is, is sustained.

One theologian describes the creation of the world by God in this way

*Jenson in Gunton, 1997, p. 22 quote*

*The world has been commanded to be good for the good intent and delight of  
the commander.*

#### **Not this...**

Israel's creation faith was unlike any of the creation stories of the nations round about  
her.

By **their** account, creation was the result of mutilation, bloodshed, violence or rivalry  
between the gods or standoff between heaven and earth.

This is not the place where we begin,  
Where all things come from the loving hands of God the maker.

We are not pawns, puppets, machines or slaves  
We are not victims of malice, caprice or the products of chance.

#### **But this...**

We are made in the very image of Godself.  
We are made for loving relationships.  
We are created in the freedom of God's joy and delight.  
We are commanded to work, and we are given the promise of God is that in our work  
we will be blessed. Work as the order of creation and new creation...  
Work then becomes the command of God and a gift from God.

## **God the potter**

This brings us to the second of Israel's accounts of creation, found in Genesis 2. Here God is the potter, labouring over the dust of the earth, forming the clay with God's own hands.

We are the clay: God is the potter.

*Form clay: can you imagine the fun, the delight God had in this?*

And having formed and shaped the human one, God breathes his own breath.

We are breathed with the breath of life

We are formed and shaped lovingly by the heart and hands of God

We share God's own life and God's own breath.

Not just some of us.

All of us

*Spirit breath*

Gen 2 is the first of a series of images in the Bible about God the potter.

In the varieties of the usage of this image in the Psalms and the prophets one thing is consistently made clear.

Isaiah (43.1) put it this way

*I formed the people for myself  
That they may proclaim my praise.*

But the Bible is even more daring than God the potter, the God who creates and we the clay which responds to the hand of the potter.

## **God the lover**

This brings us to the image of God the lover.

This is an image of God, and God-with-us which takes us deep into the character of a loving relationship

I move now to the Song of Songs, a love song between God and the people of Israel. It is an image of God which the Western church has often been very uncomfortable with.

But the Hebrew people had no embarrassment in claiming God as their lover, and they the people of God as God's especial beloved

I quote from the Song of Songs—imagine it is God the lover who speaks to you

*How beautiful you are my darling, o how beautiful to you are  
Show me your face, let me hear your voice  
Your voice is sweet, your face is lovely.*

And when lovers love, this is how the beloved replies

*My beloved is here: my perfect one is unique.*

**But** all relationships involve risk. That is the nature of relationships.  
I have said that God shared God's breath and gave to the creation its own boundaries and orders of freedom.

There is cost to God in the creation of our freedom.

The cost to God is love not returned.

The clay rebukes the potter. The lover jilts God and seeks other gods but God. Israel plays the harlot not the bride. In the lament of the prophets the mutual delight of the lovers has gone. It is God who is the bereft bridegroom, Israel a barren womb.

### **The brokenness and distortion of human "work": thru stories**

It goes without saying that a shadow crosses the world of our work, as it does across all of life.

To use the contemporary example of *Lord of the Rings*. The shadow of Mordor is long and deep. Its recruits are many. Its devices are deceptive. Its methods ominous and threatening. Its powers like to parade as if they are invincible.

To give some workplace and everyday work experiences of my own recent week

1. new manager blocked by apathy, vindictiveness and team backstabbing
2. woman discharged from hospital into a dependent role, not in control,
3. volunteer disciplined and counselled re verbal abuse and workplace harassment.

What shadows have crossed your work and week? In the household, in the community, in your paid work group?

Toil, too, is part of work.

Our groaning as we toil is part of creation's groaning.

It is part of our shared longing for liberation from vanity, from hardship, from isolation, from the fear of being worthless.

### **Work as creation and new creation**

**At the same time** work is part of the blessing and the redemption that God is intends and is bringing into being--with us, and through us

When we explore the wide ranging imagery of divine work in the bible,

We see that there is no sphere of human work and activity where God is absent.

Is there a doctor in the house?

*Work is linked in the bible to images of healing*—God the physician, God the nurse, the counsellor, the body builder, the one who makes us garments of resilience

*God's work is linked to beauty, and to practical utility*

God the perfumer, the jeweller, the weaver, the dressmaker. God the musician, the maker and singer of songs

*Our most basic and everyday needs for shelter and protection are the covering God gives us through God's work*

God the farmer, the house builder, the steward of our resources, the giver of gifts that sustain our everyday life

*At the moments of our deepest joys and hopes God is there*  
God the party host, the wine maker, the waiter and server.  
God the advocate, the freedom fighter, the nursing mother.

Whether at the highest levels of diplomacy,  
Or in the most intimate relationships,  
The work of God is present as teacher, counsellor, parent, neighbour, mentor, adviser,  
sponsor, volunteer, reconciler, listener, broker, manager, humourist, go-between.

### **Work and worship**

This is the God we celebrate  
This is the God about whom we sing.

But in scripture it is not only the people who sing joyfully to God...  
It is God who sings joyfully about us.  
At the behest of God, we share with God the work of God  
God is a song on our lips  
And we are a song on God's . (Zeph 3.14,17)

We sing and worship a God who seeks and desires relationship with us.  
God seeks to share our lives Monday through Saturday. God is not simply a Sunday observance God.  
Ours is a God of the whole of life, our working week, our working lives,  
In all their fullness and diversity.

To paraphrase slightly the Apostle Paul

*There is nothing that need separate us from the loving work of God*  
Not age, ability, background, race, culture. Not the wounds of our present or the  
barriers of our past.

### **Conclusion**

I quote again from Ecclesiastes  
*Seize the day*  
*Make the most of your toil*  
*Enjoy the fruits of your labour*  
*And give thanks to God.*

*Benediction. Amen!*