

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, (Isaiah 65:17-18, 21-22) – Work

I want you all to do some work this morning because – if you hadn't worked it out – work is the theme of this morning's service!



Have a look at this painting, *Saint Paul writing his epistles*, attributed to Valentin de Boulogne, and tell what me – in terms of historical accuracy - *what is wrong with this picture?*

- *There's already a Bible in it* – thick enough to hold both Testaments (including the epistles) - on the desk in front of him...
- *Paul is doing the writing* - but what we know about letter writing in the ancient world is that it was the task of scribes, often enslaved or formerly enslaved people. (Slavery was a very open fact of first century life – unlike now, as Ben mentioned two weeks ago, where we don't acknowledge that modern slavery is still a fact in our lives - 41,000 people in Australia experiencing modern slavery.) We see the evidence Paul had a scribe in verse 17 where he signs (and thus authenticates) this letter, *"I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write."*
- *Paul is pictured alone here* – but, as well as the scribe, almost all of Paul's letters (apart, possibly, from Romans and Ephesians) were written by groups – Galatians by the whole church! -shared letter writing exercises with Paul as the lead. Thessalonians was written by Paul and Silvanus and Timothy – and the unnamed scribe. (A nice detail in Romans is that the scribe also signs the letter: Romans 16:22; *"I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord."*)

- *The furniture and Paul's clothing and the lighting in the room and the presence of paper* (invented in China in 105 AD – after Paul wrote his letters) *are all historical anachronisms.*
- (*The sword* – traditionally paintings of Paul often contain a sword that represents his death, said to be by beheading, and the 'sword of the Spirit' – the word of God.
- *The face in the table* – is an effect in painting called *pentimento* when the top layer of oil paint on the canvas becomes transparent over time and reveals part of another composition underneath.)

So, it is very easy to see this painting and go away with the wrong idea about how '*Saint Paul wrote his epistles*'. And in the same way many people have read 2 Thessalonians and gone away with the wrong idea about what the Bible – about what God – says about the place of work in our lives.

Work is not meant to be a weapon we use to punish the poor and those experiencing injustice. In this regard, verse 10; "*Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,*" has been taken – in many contexts - out of context!

17th century colonial governor John Smith is known for teaching the people of Jamestown, Virginia, how to farm and fish, and forcing everyone to work, "*You must obey this now for a law, that he that will not work shall not eat.*" He is thus credited with saving the colony – which also involved fighting the original inhabitants of the land. But even John Smith made exceptions in his law for those who were infirm or sick – unlike those in the US who use this text to argue against any kind of social security net.

There are people who cannot work in paid work. And there are people who despite working fulltime – or more than fulltime – cannot earn a living wage. According to ACOSS and the University of NSW, 3.7 million Australians live below the poverty line – one in seven adults and one in six children. As Assistant Professor of New Testament at Regent College, Mariam Kamell, says, "*Christians need to be profoundly careful with our rhetoric.... We should be fighting for justice and help for those in that position, rather than carelessly branding people with this passage.*"

Secondly, and I declare a self-interest in saying this, work is not something we should expect Christian leaders and workers to do for free. That is another way this passage has been used in the past. But, in Philippians 4, Paul speaks about being supported financially by that church, and in 2 Corinthians 11, about receiving support from the Macedonian church. But he also, at times, was self-funding for particular reasons. In 1 Corinthians 9 he says, it was so he could demonstrate to the Corinthians that the gospel was a free gift – that he was not tied up by patronage and neither were they, and here, he says, so he could give the Thessalonians, "*an example [of faithful work] to imitate*".

Between me and you (the people who pay me) there are times I see the advantages of not being obligated to an employer – and when I see the justice of *“the labourer being worthy of his (or her) hire”*. I confess that as a woman in ministry I have also felt pressure to work harder, perhaps harder than male colleagues, to convince congregations that I was worth it! I once heard Sir Ronald Wilson, as President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, say gender inequality will not be over until as many incompetent women are appointed to positions as there are currently incompetent men! But my hope is that work will be one day fully shared and fairly remunerated, and equally respected.

I think, reading this letter, that this is what Paul and Silvanus and Timothy (and the unnamed scribe) are saying – that work is a good and a proper part of our lives – that, yes, work has been corrupted by the evil that is in our world – but that redeeming work is a good and proper part of our faith.

In 1:11; they pray that God *“will fulfill by his power [the Thessalonians] every good resolve and work of faith.”* In 2:17 that God will *“strengthen [their hearts] in every good work and word.”* In 3:8 they speak of how they *“worked night and day...with toil and labour,”* and warn against not working in verse 10, and again in verse 11. Finally, the authors urge those who have caused trouble in the community to *“to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”* All in all, in a 47-verse epistle, the word ‘work’ appears seven times.

As Ben mentioned two weeks ago, this group of Christian believers were struggling with real persecution; there were riots in the streets, there was harassment, people were struggling to survive and amid this, there were rumours Jesus had returned... In response, it seems some people had simply stopped working. I don’t know if they’d stopped their day-to-day work or they were no longer contributing to the work of the church or both, but for a church already under pressure, caring for these people, and having to do the work without them, was creating huge difficulties.

The NRSV version speaks of people being ‘idle’, but what the letter actually says is that they are working – but working against what the church is trying to do. The NRSVUE, I note, translates ‘idle’ as ‘irresponsible’. Verse 11 contains the following play on words; *“we hear that some of you will not work (ergazomenous) so instead you work mischief (periergazomenous).”*



I am reminded of the image from the 2004 Olympics where rower, Sally Robbins, dropped her oar, allowing it to drag in the water, and infamously lay down. The incident raised questions about team selection and support, but it is also a picture of how not contributing is not neutral.

The vision of work in 2 Thessalonians 3 is a vision of mutual effort in mutual service. A vision of brothers and sisters not growing weary in doing good. Where, as Ben said, the first fruits of love and justice lead on to second and third and fourth and all the fruits! Where ultimately, as Josh said, we work for the 'shalomification' of our community and our world – the vision of Isaiah - where people who build houses will live in them, where those who plant crops eat their fill, where those who work enjoy the work of their hands.



This is my absolute favourite picture of our church this year. It was a wonderful day of shared commitment to the gospel, shared work and shared love...

As we come to the end of the church year (traditionally today is the final Sunday of the church year before it begins again with Advent) can I urge you – as this letter urges you – to do your work, paid, unpaid, in the workplace, in the home, – well – to do it *"in the Lord Jesus"*. And to continue sharing the work of this church – exploring together what it means to follow Jesus today, building together an inclusive caring community and sharing together God's love and justice in our words and actions.

Church letter writing – church life living – is not a solo activity. It is the shared work of God's people – the shared vision of God for work in our world.