

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

They say that every concern in life ultimately boils down to either sex or money. I think there is truth in that statement. I am not sure it is the whole truth. But money and sex are undoubtedly huge concerns in most people's lives, even St Paul's. In the chapter from which we read, he had been arguing about money. By profession Paul had been a tent-maker, which was a skilled job and a highly lucrative one in those days, when a lot of people still lived in tents. Now he was giving more and more of his time to preach the Christian Gospel and to set up new Christian churches. He could not make tents and keep up his present level of Christian ministry, so he hoped that the churches would support him.

Some people thought this was reasonable, others thought it was a bit of a cheek, coming from someone who joined the Christian church late in life and from the opposition at that, and some thought that Paul was simply looking for an easy way of making a living. After all, anyone can just stand up and preach a sermon, can't they? And churches can run themselves, if you have enough capable people.

Those of you who were at Church meeting two weeks' ago will remember that the United Reformed Church is now having a similar discussion. The number of ministers who are paid to do their job is getting smaller and our denomination cannot afford to pay any more. So where do we most need the ones we have? Do we need them at all? As the statement at the top of the Agenda quoted, "*Ordained Ministers are not absolutely necessary to the church but they can be of benefit.*"

There have always been strong arguments both for and against professional clergy and I am not going into all that now. Paul had been arguing his case with the church in Corinth. So far as he was concerned, he was following the orders given to him by God in devoting his entire life to preaching, teaching and leading the church of Jesus Christ. He asked that the churches should recognise his calling and with it, their responsibility to support him as he did the work of God. (I get the impression that this remained an ongoing debate for the rest of his life.)

Everything boils down to sex or money? Yes, to a certain extent but there is a lot more to us than that. Scrape away the surface of an argument and you may well find sex or money underneath. But then scrape away that layer and you may well find something even deeper. We are not entirely materialistic or totally physical beings. Paul was not just thinking about money. Having said his piece, he went even deeper and found himself asking well, why was he doing this work in the first place? If he had stuck with the tent-making, he could have made a lot more money and had a lot less hassle. You do not have to smile at tents. You don't have to persuade tents to follow a certain standard of behaviour. You don't have to argue theology with a tent. You don't have to sort out disputes between different kinds of tent. If it was easy money he was after, Paul would have stood a better chance with the tents than he did with the early church. So why was he doing this, he asked himself? It was all very well to say that God had called him but what was in it for him?

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Where do you think Paul's job satisfaction lay?

When it came to money, he could not count on getting any at all. And having money is not just about being able to buy everything you need and a lot of what you want. It

is also tied up with our self-esteem. We cannot help it. The more money you are paid for doing a job, the more successful you feel.

Remember that nasty little saying: *if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys?* That is still largely the prevailing attitude in our society, meaning that people who are paid very little have a tendency to feel under-valued. And those who work voluntarily have times when they feel that people see them not so much as monkeys, but as the lowest form of pond life

So for Paul, satisfaction was not about money.

But then job satisfaction can also be about prestige. Flora Thompson, who wrote “Lark Rise to Candleford” wrote of the lay preachers who took services in the tiny chapel in her village during the 1880’s. Most were truly devout men but a few, she felt, had chosen to take up preaching as a way of shedding glory on what might otherwise have been a rather and undistinguished life.

There was a time in British society when professional clergy, particularly of the Church of England and Church of Scotland, did have a high social standing. Even if they had little money, they enjoyed prestige in the community.

But Paul did not even have this privilege. He was a pioneer. Most people outside the church thought he was mad or dangerous and many inside the church doubted him, disagreed with him and set up factions against him.

So: no money and certainly no prestige.

But what about a kind of “super-hero” factor; a superior strength? If Paul was doing the work of God, then surely the power of God would keep him cheerful and keep him superbly strong, above the levels of your average human being? After all, Paul was doing God a favour, wasn’t he? So surely God would reciprocate with extra power, if nothing else.

It is surprising how many of us feel deep down, even though we might never admit it, that by taking on our faith and committing ourselves to the Christian church we are, in some way, doing God a big favour. He is lucky to have us. And then we cannot help but feel a bit let down when we experience fully as much weariness and pain and failure as anyone else.

Paul had a long, hard struggle with this. Even if he could come to terms with the lack of money and prestige, surely he should be gifted with some kind of super-human power that would keep him from despair or from letting himself and other people down. But it did not happen. Paul was just as much a victim of depression, self-doubt, physical weariness and letting people get up his nose as any of us. He had, as he said, nothing to boast about, nothing to “sell himself” with.

No money, no prestige, no social credibility, no superior strength- where was the job satisfaction here? According to all our rules about what makes a job worth doing, the most sensible thing Paul could have done was to have given up his ministry and gone back to making tents.

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Why did he do it? As he says himself, he had no option. It was a burning, inner compulsion. It was not that God was behaving like a Sergeant Major, tipping him out of bed every morning, sticking his head under a cold shower and sending him off to preach at Corinth “or else.” It was Paul himself who, no matter how wearily he dragged himself out of bed in the morning, could not stop himself from preaching the word of God. It was with him all the time. Hundreds of years before, the prophet

Jeremiah had written that the word of God was like a “devouring fire” inside him. He could not stop preaching either. Even when people got so fed up of his uncompromising teaching that they threw him down an empty well, he still did not stop. His voice echoed up from the depths....*Hear the Word of the Lord*

In the end they gave in and pulled him out again.

For preachers like Paul and Jeremiah, preaching is not just about conveying the word of God to others. It is also your own way of discovering the word of God for yourself. Preaching is your point of contact with God and that is why you cannot stop because once you have made that contact with the true and living God, you don't ever want to lose it.

It is not just preaching. Think of artists, musicians, scientists, craftsmen, carers for whom their work is a kind of passionate vocation. They cannot give it up because for them it is a point of contact with something bigger than themselves. Yehudi Menuhin believed that the power of music had a divinity in it, which could create peace and heal pain. He proved this when he played for the inmates of a former concentration camp, waiting to be dispersed to new homes and pouring out their pain and anger in rioting. He brought calm there, where all other efforts had failed. Music was his communion with a higher power and his sharing of that power with others.

Or think of that little poem written by a young pilot in World War Two: *I have slipped the surly bonds of earth and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings...*

I've trod the high, untrampled sanctity of space, put out my hand and touched the face of God. For him it was flying that brought him into contact with God and he could not stop, not even when sent on the mission which would cost him his life.

Or think of Mother Teresa and the nuns who were queuing up to join her in her work amongst the dying in Calcutta. For them, the dirt, the disease and the distress involved were of no consequence compared with their personal experience of Jesus Christ himself among these pitiful outcasts. I can also think of many less famous men and women who have always “gone the extra mile” when it comes to caring, not out of duty or guilt or hoping that everyone will say how good they are but because there is this force of love in their hearts which keeps on pouring itself out and which is renewed day by day by God himself. Caring is their way of keeping contact with God.

I could go on indefinitely.... For each person, I believe, there is something which could become their main point of contact with God. It might be their job or it might be something they do at home. It might be work within the church or something within the community. It might be an art, a craft, a relationship, a profession, a place or even something that at first looks like a total disaster. But once you have found that point of contact and you know that it is real, you will not want to let it go. Even if it pays nothing, demands everything and causes raised eyebrows rather than applause, you will not want to let it go. *When I preach the Gospel, wrote St Paul, I cannot boast since I am compelled to preach. ... I do this for the sake of the Gospel, so that I might share its blessings.*

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Shortly before he died, Jesus gathered his disciples around him and told them that the place where they were in their lives was like being branches on a great vine. “*I am the vine and you are the branches.*” Jesus was the human face of God and he, in his ministry, had shown that the whole of life contained places of contact with God. He talked of baking bread and sowing seeds; caring for sheep and looking after children;

admiring flowers and watching the birds; births, deaths and marriages; taking long journeys and returning home; buying and selling; talking and listening. The whole of human life could be like a huge vine, with each branch producing its own particular fruit in abundance, just so long as it remained connected to the vine itself. Each branch would have its own contact point with God through Jesus Christ and from that contact point, power, grace and love would flow and enable the branch to bear its own fruit. *This is what it is all about*, Jesus said, *as you remain in me, I will remain in you.*

And then he goes on to remind them that he has called and chosen them to share in his ongoing creation and re-creation of the vine. His church is there to dream and to demonstrate the unity of all life in God: from our own personal reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ to the justice, peace and integrity of all creation. We are here to help people make their own connection with God. We are here to affirm the connections they have found, to build them up and keep them strong. We are here to pray and to work for the reconciliation of the whole world to God. We are here to grow that love, without which, Jesus said, the vine simply cannot survive. Paid or unpaid, applauded or ignored, strong or weak, we, the church have our part to play in the growing of the vine and that is one of our great points of contact with God.

The church is not an end in itself. It is not the vine. It exists to share in the creation and nurturing of the vine. Paul preached because he could not help himself but preach. And we know that his preaching did not only or even always create packed churches but it did inspire men and women to be better husbands and more faithful wives; responsible leaders and reliable workers; inspiring carers and successful builders of bridges; honest merchants and craftsmen of integrity. And the religious life these people shared was vibrant and joyful. They had found their point of contact with God, their place on the vine, through hearing and receiving the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What's in it for me?

In doing what I do, I put out my hand and touch the face of God.

What more can there be?

Amen