

Poverty (2): Purpose

Scripture

Gen 2.15; Ex 19.5f; Deu 4.5-8; Pss 8; 67.1-3; Isa 49.6; Eze 36.23-27; Mic 4.1f; Mt 7.15-20; Lk 20.9-18; Rom 12.1f; Gal 6.7-10; Eph 2.8-10; Phi 2.12-15; Heb 13.16; Jam 3.13; 1 Pet 2.12.

Graih

1): Toby had suffered for a long time. A gradual descent into substance abuse led him first into addiction to heroin and then, off the heroin, into alcoholism. Close bereavement haunted him with memories of pain. Relationships with his family fractured and broke. The cycles of sobriety and relapse, of planning for rehab and then bingeing, led Toby deeper into despair. He took to doing little else but staring at the television all day. When I visited him he was sat in a haze of smoke, surrounded by bottles and cans. The pain and despair robbed him of any motivation for any action that was good. Toby lapsed into existence, devoid of any meaningful life.

Bobby came to Graih when alcoholism had taken his job, marriage and home from him. He was a successful tradesman who had run businesses and owned houses. He knew what it was to pursue material gain. Slowly, through relationships formed with people he met at the drop-in, Bobby started to change. He saw something different in the Christians that he wanted for himself. Bobby started to rediscover faith and, alongside it, longer and longer periods of sobriety. He also found that he saw work with fresh eyes. The desire for more at any cost was gone and Bobby saw that the pursuit of the 'big prize' was mistaken. He saw clearly the venality, greed and exploitation that had marked the trade he was in, and the need for an alternative. Bobby realised that he wished to help serve others in difficulty and that he could be content with materially less. His whole concept of work and purpose was transformed.

2): Graih has contact with people who have a range of perspectives on work. Some have never worked and never want to. Others have spent their entire lives working and have struggled to adjust to life without employment. Some are desperate for work, struggling to keep hope as rejection after rejection rolls in. What is plain across the board is that a lack of purpose breeds despair. Far more than paid employment, purpose stands at the heart of a life with meaning. For many of the people we see work is either an enemy to be avoided or a taskmaster to endure. This is an attitude they share with large swathes of wider society. Both these views lead to despair. At the same time, people struggle to conceive of meaning and purpose that is not paid employment. Their sense of value and worth is drawn from their paid employment, or devastated in its absence. To all of this Graih seeks to involve people in good, simple work and to point to a purpose, meaning and value that transcends paid employment.

Questions

1. What is your experience of work (or not)? Is it a blessing or a burden?
2. Scripture suggests that we are created for a purpose. How does this inform your view of work?
3. How does a Christian vision of purpose contrast with society's views on work and value?
4. How can we ensure that people are called to a good purpose whether or not they are paid? How do we create these opportunities for people, especially for those who feel that they have nothing to offer?
5. Do you identify with Bobby's critique of work? What should a Christian response look like in a busy, materialistic culture?

Ideas for further action

1. Identify how your work does (or does not) participate in God's kingdom. Commit to changing what needs to be changed to enable you to do so, and support one another.
2. Explore ways in which you can create or catalyse opportunities for people with less education and skills to be involved in good work (businesses, mentoring, co-operatives, apprenticeships, placements etc).
3. Celebrate purpose in your life and as a group, particularly those areas not touched by paid employment.
4. Befriend one person struggling with a lack of purpose and support them.

Prayer

Father, thank you that you are a God of purpose, and that you will bring all things to right. Help us to participate in the work of your kingdom with peace and justice.

Jesus, thank you that the salvation you bring gives us meaning and purpose. Lead us in the paths of the good way of life you have created for us, so that all may see the joy of your kingdom.

Spirit, thank you for the gifts you give to each of us for the use of encouraging and serving one another. Give us the courage and imagination we need to find meaning and purpose in you and not in society's misplaced values.

Amen.