

Overview

Do you find that some parts of your work seem creative and fulfilling whilst other parts feel like a drudge and a real struggle to get through? How do we make sense of these different aspects of work as a whole? In this unit we will explore the idea of work and seek to discover how we might describe the work that is central to who we are. We will have a chance to reflect on ways that we might enhance the joy and satisfaction we and others experience through our work.

Question

Which parts of your work do you enjoy most? Which do you enjoy least?

Enjoy most

Enjoy least

Question

Work, Labour and Toil

Work, Labour and Toil are used in the Bible; sometimes in the same passage. For example :

“We did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it: but with toil and labour we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you” (2 Thessalonians 3:8 NRSV)

What do you think are the different meanings of work, labour and toil?

Work, Labour and Toil

The idea of work is actually a rather complex thing. We may think of it initially as if it were about (paid) employment, but there is more to it than that. There is more to work than “job. For example it may well include voluntary work, unpaid work of various kinds, and can embrace all human activity including hobbies and recreation. We might gather the idea of work under three headings, and it would be good to reflect on our own activity, our “doings” under these headings – they are labour, work and toil.

Labour is about the necessity of having to work – addressing the chores, if you like, and the repetitive nature of human activity just to keep things going e.g. everything from brushing one’s teeth to cutting the grass to earning an income to pay the bills. It has something to do with repetitiveness and necessity. In the ancient world what was prized above all was freedom. Consequently labour (as what we can call work) was best done by slaves. In Hesiod’s *Works and Days* farming is done by slaves and tame animals and the idea is the gentleman farmer who does not have to do this himself and has leisure for other pursuits.

Work is what we choose to do in what expresses our creativity. Thus the artist works. As the Psalmist prays “Prosper the work of our hands” or as in Charles Wesley’s hymn: “Forth in thy name O Lord I go, my daily labour to pursue ... in all my works thy presence find ... To labour on at thy command, and offer all my works to thee”. Here labour and work go hand in hand and may even be synonymous. But work conveys a sense of purposive change that brings fulfilment and is more than the repetitive round of human existence. Thus (significantly) God is thought of as a worker or a craftsman who makes things, rather than a labourer who does things.

Toil is a concept attendant on both labour and work. The single English word covers what in Greek are the two words *kopos* and *ponos*. *Kopos* is effort and energy informed by the desirability of the best outcome i.e. the harder the work the richer the reward. *Ponos* expresses more the hard graft, the struggle and pain (cf painstaking) involved in so many tasks. The idea of toil (especially as *ponos*) naturally associates itself with the aforementioned meaning(s) of labour, *kopos* (as effort), is perhaps more the counterpart to the aforementioned meaning(s) of work. In these ways we can think about how toil engages with both labour and work. In many regards the aim is to take toil out of labour as much as possible – labour-saving devices and strategies. With work, on the other hand, effort is necessary and desirable – maximum effort rightly applied and understood is a key driver of human creativity and inventiveness. Of course as with the interface of labour and work, it is a moot point when hard work becomes toil and drudgery.

‘Work, Labour and Toil’ by Revd Dr Jim Francis, and written for After Sunday 2009, based on the work of Hannah Arendt in her book The Human Condition (1999, Chicago University Press)

Discussion

How do your ideas about work, labour and toil relate to these descriptions?

Activity

Looking at your 'work'

Pick up to 5 key areas of your current life/kinds of work e.g. your job, family and leisure. Identify for each what activities you regard as labour, work or toil in each area.

What is the balance of labour, work and toil across each of your chosen areas? It may be helpful to put a percentage.

Key areas of my life and work	Labour	Work	Toil

Analysis

Questions to explore

- What does this analysis tell you about what you value in your work?
- How does your perception of what is Work, Labour and Toil differ from other members of the group?
- How is the balance of time /energy between the three columns and can it be improved?
- Is there any way that Labour and Toil could be made more meaningful?
- What would you most like to change about the pattern in your life?
- What small practical steps could you take towards that?
- Does this give any insight into how we imagine God's work in creation?

During the week, you might like to reflect on :



**Can you do something
this week to make work
more fulfilling for yourself
or others?**

Ponder

What did you learn from this session?

Prayer

God of grace and goodness
who made us body and spirit
that our work and our faith may be one:
may we, by our life and our worship,
join in your labour to bring forth a new creation in justice, love and truth;
through Jesus our Redeemer
Amen

From Celebrating Common Prayer (Continuum, 2005)