



FREE THINKING

A series of occasional papers to
stimulate theological reflection
on the implementation of
Setting God's People Free

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Let the service begin

**A biblical reflection on the language of worship,
ministry and work**

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At the turn of the millennium, I was vicar of St Paul's Church, Walsall. My curate, Simon Harvey, had been an engineer before his ordination and knew that this earlier phase of his life had been a vocation, a ministry in its own right – not merely a preparation for priesthood. Thanks to Simon, we had a series of Sunday services called Faith at Work. Members of the congregation were invited to speak about their calling not in the time when the people of God are gathered (for worship on Sunday, for instance) but when they are dispersed, serving God in the community. Members placed on the Holy Table a symbol of their work. I vividly remember a splint put there by a physio. I also asked various members of the congregation if I could visit them in their place of work. To this day I remember the doctor's surgery, the factory floor and the boatbuilder's yard that I went to – and the consternation, but also appreciation, of colleagues in the workplace.

Of course, St Paul's wasn't unique; and my faltering attempts to affirm the non-church-based ministries of the congregation were not unique even back then. But we still have a long way

to go to redress the balance we've inherited from the past. We have a diminished sense of what the life of faith means, a second-best attitude to what a life of worship is all about. If we are to engage in Setting God's People Free, we need the opposite – a largeness of vision, a fuller sense of destiny. This, as I will outline, is a thoroughly biblical vision.

Exodus 5.1-23 (NRSVA)

¹Afterwards Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness."' ²But Pharaoh said, 'Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.' ³Then they said, 'The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.' ⁴But the king of Egypt said to them, 'Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labours!' ⁵Pharaoh continued, 'Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!' ⁶That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, ⁷'You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. ⁸But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, "Let us go and offer sacrifice

to our God.”⁹ Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labour at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.’

¹⁰So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, ‘Thus says Pharaoh, “I will not give you straw. ¹¹Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least.”’¹²So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw. ¹³The taskmasters were urgent, saying, ‘Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.’¹⁴And the supervisors of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and were asked, ‘Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?’

¹⁵Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, ‘Why do you treat your servants like this? ¹⁶No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, “Make bricks!” Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people.’¹⁷He said, ‘You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, “Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.”’¹⁸Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.’¹⁹The Israelite supervisors saw that they were in trouble when they were told, ‘You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.’²⁰As they left Pharaoh, they came upon Moses and Aaron who were waiting to meet them. ²¹They said to them, ‘The Lord look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odour with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.’

²²Then Moses turned again to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me?’²³Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people.’

a larger act of liturgy. But, of course, the entire act is worship. Everything we offer God – including songs and prayers, but also our work, our money, our time, and our very lives – is worship.

In English the word ‘service’ perhaps captures the breadth of the biblical vision of worship. We can use the word ‘service’ narrowly in English; just as in the Bible the word ‘worship’ can be used narrowly. Your parish church may have a notice board outside publicising service times: ‘Sundays, 10.30, Holy Communion’, perhaps. In church circles the word ‘service’ can thus have a narrow meaning. But outside the church, it usually means something much broader. If someone says they work in the service industry, we don’t assume they are a vicar. If you sign a service level agreement at work, it doesn’t commit you to attending church a certain number of times a year. If you complain at a restaurant that the service was poor, it doesn’t mean the prayers and hymns weren’t to your liking. When we gather in church, it’s to serve God with our prayers and praises. We offer him service. But when we leave our church buildings, it’s also to serve God. Our service continues. And that’s how the word ‘worship’ works in the Bible. It’s a 24/7 kind of word – a big, broad, life-embracing kind of word.

In Exodus 3:12, God gives Moses a task. He’s to lead the people of Israel, out of slavery in Egypt, to freedom in the promised land. ‘I will be with you’, says God, ‘and this will be the sign that I have sent you. When you have brought the people up out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain’. Then, in Exodus 4:23, the Lord tells Moses, ‘Say to Pharaoh, let my son go, that he may worship me’. Moses was called to lead his people out of slavery, so that they might worship God in freedom. God specifically uses the word ‘worship’ in Exodus 3 and 4. The Hebrew is *abad*, which we might equally translate ‘serve’.

In Exodus 5, the word ‘worship’ appears to disappear. One might think it’s there in the first verse, when Moses and Aaron get their audience with Pharaoh and say that God has charged them to tell him, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness’. But Moses suppresses God’s words of 4:23, about Israel being God’s son, and doesn’t use the word ‘worship’. Moses uses what I argue is a narrower phrase: ‘celebrate a festival’. The Hebrew is *chagag*: ‘to make a pilgrimage’ (you may recognise the cognate Arabic word *hajj*; and it’s also the root of the name of the Prophet Haggai). ‘Pilgrimage’ has a narrower frame of reference than ‘worship’ or ‘service’. Perhaps Moses uses a narrower word deliberately, to disarm Pharaoh. ‘We’re not after much’, he says, ‘just a pilgrimage’.

The trend to narrowness continues in verse 3: ‘Let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God’. This time the Hebrew for ‘make a sacrifice’ is *zabach* – a word God himself used in briefing Moses in Exodus 3:18. Moses continues: ‘or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword’ – another interesting spin on what God actually said (there are no hints of any reprisals earlier in the story).

What does the word ‘worship’ mean to you? In the Bible it’s a big, broad word. In most church circles we use it in a narrow sense – to refer to religious ceremonies or the songs and prayers we offer to God. Sometimes ‘a time of worship’ is used to describe the songs of praise to God we sing in the context of



It seems Moses tries hard to speak Pharaoh's own language, to put what God has said in terms Pharaoh can understand – in terms Pharaoh might most easily agree to. But he's dropped the word 'worship' in the process. Pharaoh appears to understand this narrow language, and to be unthreatened by it. In verses 8 and 17, Pharaoh twice reflects the same words back to Moses: 'It's because they're lazy that they cry 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to [zabach] our God''.

Has the word 'worship' truly dropped out of this passage? No. In Hebrew, the word *avodah* is like our word 'service'. Sometimes it means 'worship' and sometimes it means 'work'. In chapters 3 and 4, on the lips of God, the word is translated as 'worship'. It probably did imply 'celebrate a festival' and 'offer sacrifices', but this big word has a much larger field of reference. It means 'serve God by keeping festival', 'serve God by offering sacrifice'. And in chapter 5, on the lips of Pharaoh, the same word is translated 'work' in verses 9, 11 and 18. And the word is also there in verses 15 and 16, on the lips of the Israelite supervisors, where it's translated 'servants' (or, in some versions, 'bondage').

Avodah is not the only word used for work in this passage. Another Hebrew word, *asah*, is used in verses 4, 9 and 13; which we might translate 'outputs' or 'achievements'. And yet another word, *siblah*, meaning something more like 'labours' or 'burdens', appears in verse 5.

For all the spin Moses puts on what God actually told him to say, Pharaoh rumbles, or somehow intuits, what Moses' request is really all about. The people of Israel can't serve both God and Pharaoh. If you are a slave to Pharaoh, then you are not free to worship God. If you're Pharaoh's slave, you can't be Yahweh's firstborn son. To worship God, it's not enough to pop into the desert for three days, a couple of times a year on pilgrimage, to make festival or offer sacrifices. It's necessary to serve him with your whole life. Pharaoh knows this and responds by making the burden of work for the Israelites heavier. Moses asks, 'Can we go and serve (worship) our God?', and Pharaoh replies, 'No. You can stay here and serve (or work for) me – and (in effect) worship me'.

In the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20, *avodah*, and its cognates, is used for 'slavery' in the first commandment ('I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery: you shall have no other gods but me'); in the second commandment to encourage the worship of the living God and forbid the worship of idols ('You shall not bow down to them or serve them'); and, again, in the fourth commandment to forbid work on the sabbath day ('For six days you shall labour and do all your work'). And *abad* is used in Genesis 2:15 when Adam is commissioned to till the earth. That was his noble vocation – a kind of a worship, an offering of service to God. True and authentic worship arises out of a sense of oneself in relation to God. Adam tilling the Garden of Eden was worship only as he knew himself to be in relation to God. With the breaking of that relationship, the same activity became hard labour for him. When instructing Moses what to say to Pharaoh, God says, 'Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son.

Let my son go that he may worship me'. The expectation of worship rests on a prior assumption of relationship. Without the relationship, we might still have the offering of sacrifices and the making of pilgrimages, but not worship. That is just going through the motions. Without this sense of relationship, even the most apparently religious activity doesn't constitute worship.

Conversely, this sense of relationship is capable of turning even the least promising ordinary labour into an act of worship. Isn't that what Paul is getting at, in Colossians 3:23-24, when, addressing actual slaves, he tells them, 'Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as a reward: you serve the Lord Christ'? A sense of oneself in relation to the Lord is capable of transforming even what is literal slavery into an act of worship. That's not to say that we can't distinguish between work that is, as it were, conducive to worship and work that is antithetical to worship. We can. Exodus 5 again helps us: labour which is oppressive and exploitative tends towards enslavement, not worship.

Something similar can be seen in the New Testament in the Greek vocabulary for 'service'.



Mark 1.14-34 (NSRVA)

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' ²⁶And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

Mark chapter 1 is all action. Mark sets the tone for the first half of his gospel, in which Jesus dashes around like a wonder-working superhero, teaching, preaching and performing miracles – a portrait Mark then goes on to subvert from chapter 9 onwards as he ultimately presents Jesus as the crucified one, the suffering servant.

I dislike hearing the word 'ministry' used as a shorthand for 'ordained ministry'. People still sometimes say, 'They're going into the ministry'. No! Ministry is service, and it's expected of every member of the people of God. If you are baptised, you are by default a minister in Christ's service. Ordained ministry is just one possible outworking of that baptismal obligation.

We could argue that Jesus was engaged in vital preaching and teaching ministry as he proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom; that he was engaged in vital evangelistic ministry when he called Peter, Andrew, James and John to be his followers; that he was engaged in vital deliverance ministry when he cast the unclean spirit out of the man in the synagogue; and that he was engaged in vital healing ministry when he rebuked the fever of Peter's mother in law and then cured many who were sick with various diseases in Capernaum. But the fact is that when Mark uses the verb 'to minister', 'to serve', *diakoveō*, which he does only once in this chapter, it is not to dignify any of those instances of Jesus' activity. It is in verse 31 – when he tells us that Peter's mother in law, now made well, began to serve them. She began to minister to them. Mark doesn't specify how, but presumably it was by offering some sort of hospitality.

We should not project onto Mark any patronising assumption that this is the only sort of ministry the New Testament permits a woman – behind the scenes, in the home, practical

not spiritual, ordinary not spectacular. No, Mark knows perfectly well what he is doing. He is very sparing in his use of that word 'service'. He uses it only eight times in all, and it becomes almost a definitive way to describe the sort of Messiah Jesus has come to be. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. It's Peter's anonymous mother in law who models the way of Jesus: service ministry – the Jesus way.

'Liturgy' is perhaps another of these large words. Etymologies are an uncertain guide to the current meaning of words, but sometimes etymology can be sobering. I am glad to be reminded every now and again that our word 'liturgy' is made up of two Greek words: *leitōs*, which means 'public' or 'of the people'; and *ergos*, which means 'work'.

Where am I going with this? I'm trying to encourage us to reflect again on how we use words like 'worship' and 'ministry', and how we hear them used. What forms of activity do our uses of these words usually signify; and what forms of activity do we marginalise in the process? Passages like Exodus 5 and Mark 1 encourage us to have a big vision of worship, one which is Monday to Saturday, and not just Sunday; one that is kingdom-shaped and not just church-shaped; one that is about what goes on after the dismissal at the end of the liturgy, and not just before it. I heard of one vicar who routinely concludes the Eucharist with the words, 'That's the end of the service; now let the service begin'.

If we are going to set God's people free, we may have to begin very gently, very modestly, by setting biblical vocabulary free, by letting words like 'worship' and 'ministry' carry their full weight among us.

About Setting God's People Free

Setting God's People Free (SGPF) is a programme of change across the Church of England to enable the whole people of God to live out the Good News of Jesus confidently in all of life. The programme seeks to implement proposals from the report of the same name presented to General Synod in 2017; to find effective ways to affirm the calling of all Christians, with a confident faith and vision for the Kingdom of God, which is lived out in homes, schools, communities and places of work.

- SGPF looks beyond and outside Church structures to the whole people of God at work in communities and wider society.
- SGPF challenges a culture that over-emphasises a distinction between sacred and secular to a fuller vision of calling within the all-encompassing scope of the Gospel.
- SGPF seeks to affirm and enable the complementary roles and vocations of clergy and of lay people, grounded in our common baptism.
- SGPF proposes imaginative steps to nourish, illuminate and connect what is working already in and through parishes and communities of faith.