

Hymns: **11** **“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!”**
 159 **“Not far beyond the sea nor high”**
 673 **“Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?”**
 350 **“I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship”**

Readings: **Isaiah 6:1-8**
 Romans 8:12-17

“LIFE/WORK BALANCE”

We have two student ministers with us today – Chris Jackson who’ll be spending the whole of the month of June with us and, of course, our own beloved Kido Baek. Ministerial training is so different from my day. You have to be a marathon runner just to get in. I’ve often thought that, were I to apply these days, I’d never make it.

One feature that’s very different is the attention given during training to the matter of getting the balance right between “life” and “work”. To do this, they define the two words in a very precise way:

- work = the job you’re paid to do; as defined in Standing Orders. This should mean anything between 35-50 hours per week and warning bells should ring if you find yourself compulsively (or under pressure) doing more.
- life = what’s left when you’re not at work. Discreet time for recreation, for relaxation, for enjoying the family.

This is a very important consideration. When I lived in the suburbs, people (usually men) went off to work before their children were awake and got home when they were already in bed. They only saw them at weekends. Here, in the City, the hub of the global market, I know people who get off to work in time to catch the Far Eastern market and home when they’ve dealt with what’s happening in America. Clearly, something’s wrong with this and we hear talk of burn-out and the like. It’s not difficult to see how wrong this can be.

But we should be careful how we import worries of this kind from the secular world. It has serious flaws. Let me look at the two passages of scripture we’ve been considering this morning before offering some further remarks.

We heard the familiar words of Isaiah. He saw the Lord. He was given a full-on display of the Lord's glory. This was not normally granted to ordinary human-beings. It was awesome. It wasn't, however, a gesture given for its own sake. He'd been given this vision for a purpose. Now that he'd "seen the Lord" he was to proclaim a special message from the Lord. To a people who wouldn't listen; stubborn, wilful, stupid people.

How long? He asked fearfully. The answer didn't sound like 35-50 hours per week. The opposite. It's a job you'll have to do until it's completed. You must go on announcing my appeal for as long as it takes, with every breath in your body: people are destroying each other, the world's in a mess, so you mustn't give up, nor retreat from your responsibilities. A word for his day? Yes. And for ours too.

Isaiah has to understand that the closeness to God which he's been privileged to enjoy has a purpose, an outcome. He's got to address some huge questions. And that closeness to God will be the motor that keeps him going, the energy that he's going to need, the source of courage and stimulation that will allow him to persevere.

And things are similar in the New Testament passage too. Again, there's a picture that shows a closeness to God – so close that it might even be called intimate. "Abba" – Father – that's how close. So then? Is that it? The working of God's spirit witnessing with our spirits that we are God's children – a very desirable situation to find ourselves in? A whoopee moment? Gee, ain't that lovely? Alas, there's more to it than that. The relationship with God now transforms our understanding of the way we must live our lives. Anything may come our way. There's an impressive list of some potential obstacles presented in Paul's passage – hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, the sword (or their modern equivalents). These may be faced and endured, endured and overcome, because nothing, nothing at all, can separate us from the life-giving, energy-supplying, morale-boosting love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's what our two passages have pointed out to us. Closeness to God is inevitably yoked to being filled with transformative power and impelled on a mission to the world at large. We'll never be prophets in the same way that Isaiah was a prophet. And yet there will be moments when we have to do prophetic deeds just as he did – when we have to speak up for what's right to a generation that has lost the art of listening, or else we'll have to refuse to do something which is against the fundamental principles upon which we build our lives. Oh yes, there will be times when we must act as prophets. But surely, you'll say, we're not expected to be martyrs. Not in the full sense at all. But there will be "little martyrdoms" that we'll have to endure. We'll have to put our life on the line when we make choices that line us up against the prevailing culture of the day and people will sometimes despise us for doing so. All of us are invited to enjoy a close relationship with God. That's why we're here this morning. And if we enjoy such a relationship, we'll need to discover that it's a close **working** relationship with God. Indeed there will have to be something of the prophet, something of the

martyr, about the way we live our daily lives. And some of that will affect the way we look at our work.

We so often throw babies away with the water they are bathed in. Here I want to seize an idea from the writings of (shock! horror!) Karl Marx.

No, not the way his ideology was worked out in Communist Russia under Joseph Stalin (or Vladimir Putin if it comes to that); nor the way it was applied in revolutionary China under Mao Tse Tung. Nor am I going to indulge in a silly denunciation of the energies of capitalism or the virtues of enterprise.

But I am going to pull out of the philosophy of Marx one thing. It's what he said about the value of work. He argued that when the political economy under which we live promotes greed (and war among the greedy) under the idea of "competition"; and when human-beings, instead of controlling and exploiting the product of their labour are **controlled by** the products of their labour, subject as they are to the unpredictable movement of the markets, - **THEN** we can experience what Marx calls "alienation". Was there ever a word more fitting to describe the apathy and the fearfulness of our contemporary age? The work we do, argues Marx, serves to deepen this sense of alienation. It serves ends we don't understand, or (worse) we don't agree with. Work now becomes something to be endured; it's what we do to earn money, to support a lifestyle, to raise our kids. It's something we tolerate, endure, can't wait to be released from through retirement.

In the matter of life/work balance, everything depends on how you see/understand "work". I want Christians (and perhaps especially ministers) to approach work as a part of life, a contribution to life, an enhancement of the meaning of life, **rather than** a necessary evil, the sweat of our brow, the ticking of boxes. When I became a minister, I didn't think of it as a job but as a life. And the world of work has to reminded of its moral compass - the building of character, the development of a sense of purpose and meaning, the building of a world based on fairness and justice. Closeness to God has to lead to a closeness to the secular world and to pit our best energies in the struggle to build it back better.

And we can't avoid asking these questions. Let me tell you about Sonia Avila who was laid to rest this week. The flowers from her funeral are on our Communion table this morning.

Sonia came here as a refugee (one of those dreadful "immigrants" that we're all so het up about at the moment). She came from Peru where terrorists had sought to wipe out her family. One of her brothers was killed by dumping him alive out of an aeroplane flying over the Andes. Sonia was gang-raped and beaten up. She was in therapy for years. She came here for solace. I remember her driving her wheelchair at breakneck speed towards the Communion table when she was sharing in fellowship with us. She died after many years of internalised terror. May she rest in peace.

While the world is in the state it's in, with people like Sonia spewed up in all directions, victims of oppression and banal cruelty, then we whom God has called and equipped must understand our role as part of an army seeking to overcome evil with good.

A view of work as something that finances a life of pleasure and self-indulgence, or even survival, isn't enough. In our work; in our play, in our fun and in our pain; from nine to five and 24/7; we are ambassadors for a better world, we believe the force is with us, and we must not slide back into escapism, hedonism, patterns of denial. We must be on the march to build a better world. And we must go about these endeavours knowing that nothing:

- neither death, nor life;
- neither angels nor rulers;
- neither things present nor things to come;
- neither powers nor pressures;
- neither height nor depth;
- nor anything else in all creation,

must separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Or from his deep desire to make the world a better place. Amen.