

Comment

On 1st May some 4,000 people gathered in Liverpool to demonstrate their support for the 200 or so marchers of the People's March Against Unemployment as they set off on their month-long walk to London. And it would be heartening to believe Mr Tony Benn's description, in his send-off speech, of the north west of England as "the graveyard of British capitalism", but in the sense opposite to which he meant it – i.e. the graveyard of *capitalism* rather than the graveyard *produced* by it. Unfortunately the immediate prognosis is that the grim misery of rising unemployment is to be with us for some time yet and that even more graveyards will be needed to supplement those already in the north west and north east of England and industrial Scotland, Wales and Ulster.

Why is unemployment so grim and morale sapping? Obviously its consequences of economic hardship, chronic frustration and hopeless boredom are appalling, but there is clearly something about unemployment which fuels a sense of worthlessness and failure.

'The Right to Work' and even 'the dignity of work' are familiar cries, but for the majority of working people the jobs they do and the conditions they work under can rarely be described as dignifying, nor is it easy, on the face of it, to see how they demand the 'right' to such employment. Job satisfaction is, comparatively speaking, for the few. Many, many people find that the job they do is not dignifying, not humanly enriching, but alienating and stunting; the only good thing about work is clocking-off and collecting the wage packet. But paradoxically, no matter how humdrum and heart-achingly alienating the job may be, once lost there is a feeling of being wasted, degraded and dehumanised. Work is clearly an ambiguous business.

This ambiguous nature of human work is posed in the Creation stories in Genesis. On the one hand, through work Adam (man) shares in the creativity of God: "So God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them . . . and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue* it'" (Genesis 1:27). On the other hand the grimness and struggle involved in

work is located as a consequence of man's brokenness: "In the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread" (Genesis 3:19). The author of Genesis locates the dignity of human work in its possibility of being the manifestation of man's creativity, (sharing in the divine), in that through work he transcends the limits of his biological nature and makes history in the sense that he subdues nature and uses it to create his *own* world, a *human* world. Now creating a human world is the task of creating a human community in which men and women live with each other and for each other's mutual upbuilding in love. Through our work, then, we have the possibility of experiencing how we share in the creativity of God by creating a world in which human community flourishes.

Now perhaps it is for this reason that unemployment is experienced as humanly degrading. It is not simply a matter of not being employed, (with all that involves in terms of economic and social hardship), but being, as we say, 'out of work', 'out of' in the sense of being prevented from exercising this creative role in and for society. The out-of-work person feels himself or herself as pushed out on to the fringe of society and accordingly dehumanised. Even in a society like ours, with all its bogus claims to being a community and in which work can be so alienating, having *a* job (rather than a *particular* job) is very important because it contributes to a sense of belonging, however tenuous. Perhaps this is why many workers prefer a job with below poverty-line wages to being on the dole and slightly financially better off.

The Christian critique of capitalism as sinful is to do with that system's destruction of men's and women's work as the possibility of expressing their human creativity, and usurping it for creating profit and fuelling greed. The ideology of that system cannot allow for work to be for the enrichment of the community as a whole. If it could, surely people would never be 'out of work' and there would be no slumps or social graveyards. Christian theology's appeal to humanity in the matter of work is surely to call for a restoration of work as an expression of human dignity which mirrors the creativity of God and strives for the upbuilding and enrichment of the human community.

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