

Both Sin and Hope Remain Present in Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Malachi 1-3, and Zechariah 1

Even in the time of restoration, human sin is never far away. Malachi, the third of the restoration prophets, complains that some of the people begin to profit by defrauding labourers of their wages. Not surprisingly, such people also pollute the temple worship by stinting what they contribute in offerings, and as a result the environment is also degraded.

Yet the hope of the prophets remains, and work is at the centre of it. It begins with a promise to restore the religious/social infrastructure of the temple. “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 3:1). It proceeds with the restoration of the environment. “I will rebuke the locust” (Malachi 3:11) and then “you will be a land of delight” (Malachi 3:12). People go about their work ethically, and as a result the economy is restored, including “the produce of your soil” and “your vine in the field” (Malachi 3:11).

The constant theme in the Twelve Prophets is that no worship is acceptable to God unless it is accompanied by economic and political justice, for God does not recognize a split between the work of worship and the work of daily life. Economic development, just commerce, government that provides for the common good, and work in the service of others form the basis of true worship. Everyone is called to work in cooperation with God and the community of faith towards the peace and wellbeing that God longs for in his creation.

This is still our call today as much as it was in ancient Israel. In the Hebrew ordering of the Old Testament, which Christians also observe, the Book of the Twelve Prophets has the last word before the pages of the New Testament open. Thus they point towards Jesus, who came to fulfill the hopes of the prophets for abundant life in every sphere of human activity, including work, and in doing so brings into being the promise God made to Zechariah, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity” (Zechariah 1:17).