

Working it out!

Malachi 4^{1-2a}; Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 3⁶⁻¹³; Luke 21⁵⁻¹⁹

*You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.
[Malachi 4²]*

Do you worry about your reputation? If you were to ask your family and friends, how would they sum up your character? Just who are we? How do we work out who we are?

In the readings today, we have two very contrasting approaches in the Epistle and in the Gospel, all set against the hope in the Old Testament that God sorts it all out in the end.

Neither has an easy message and neither softens what they say:

- ✦ Paul is blunt: **living in idleness** is not the tradition you received from us. His approach was to pay for everything that he ate and not to depend on the hospitality or generosity of others, even though he could legitimately do so as a servant of the Gospel. Just as Christians were expected to imitate their faith, so they were to imitate the Apostles in the practical things in life.

The day I left school my grandfather sat me down at the kitchen table and quoted the command that Paul issued: **anyone unwilling to work should not eat**. Then followed a year before theological studies working in a fish factory and then, in the summer, as a ships' painter.

Paul indicates that **those living in idleness**, who are not gainfully employed, become **mere busybodies**. Fulfilling the old proverb, *the devil finds work for idle hands to do!*

I don't want to give an historical lecture on the benefits of the Protestant Work Ethic and nor do I think it appropriate to focus only on those who work and hereby contribute to society through their taxes and spending power, but I do want to reinforce that it is appropriate, within our competence and power, to be gainfully engaged through life. It is the Christian thing to do!

A reputation for honest and hard work is something to be coveted.

- ✦ The message in the Gospel resonates with so much that we hear from those who warn us today that this world is heading for destruction: and they can, with all the evidence of flooding and fires, sound very convincing. Those things, together with plagues and famines and wars are not necessarily portents that herald the end of the world.

There isn't much cheer in Jesus saying that **before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you... you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name**. Nor is there in his prediction that **you will be betrayed by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death**.

The good news is that **this will give you an opportunity to testify** and that Jesus assures us that we need to **make up (y)our minds not to prepare a defence in advance; for I will give you words of wisdom that none of your opponents that will be able to withstand or contradict** and that, despite the fact **we** will be hated by all, **not a hair of (y)our head will perish** and that **by your endurance you will gain your souls**.

Just as there are those who will not work, so too there are Christians who will not engage with the world in which we live or with those who live around them because they fear the consequence. We will only be able to work out how reliable God is, how faithful he is to his promises, when we risk doing something for him instead of standing on the fringes and watching.

It is easier to cool down a fanatic than warm up a corpse!

So, what do people say about you? A hard worker? Excellent! A faithful witness to Christ?