

God's Presence in The Workplace

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[0 : 0 0] It was April 110 years ago, 1912. The Titanic, the great ship that was built with the promise that could never sink, sank. There's an image about that that I want to share with you, and it's an image that has to do with the cause, the way in which it sunk. I've got a little visual aid I'm going to hold up here. It's an ice cube tray. I think I can guess what you might think the link may be, but I'm guessing that it's probably not what the link is you think it might be, but we'll come back to that in a moment. We're thinking about faith in the workplace, God's presence in the workplace, and I just want to give you a few figures to think about. These are broad brush figures, okay, but I want you to imagine that you work nine till five, Monday to Friday, like a standard sort of set pattern, and that you do that with 28 days holiday a year, so that's 48 weeks of that. I want you to imagine that you do that for 45 years.

Now, I realise that there could be all sorts of different variables thrown into the mix there, but for the sake of trying to get some broad brush figures together, imagine that's what you do, nine till five, 48 weeks a year times 45 years. And imagine that you live to what is currently the average age expectancy within the UK, which is around 81 years. I say around, it's point something. And again, there's all sorts of variables that can be thrown into that one. If you were to do that, then you would spend about 10% of your life on earth working. How might that compare with the amount of time that we spend gathered in church? Well, again, I'll give you some broad brush things, but imagine that you come to church every Sunday and that you spend about an hour and a half here. And imagine that you do the same thing at some kind of midweek activity, whether that's a home group or something else, again, about an hour and a half. And imagine that you were to do that every single week without exception, no sickness, no exceptions for if you happen to be away or whatever, but you would do that for every single week, hour and a half on the Sunday, an hour and a half midweek, every single week for those same 45 years of your working life. Again, broad brush figures, but that would equate to approximately 1% of your life. The point I'm trying to drive to here is that when we make the comparison, and we spend a lot of time talking about church and how we do church and how our faith connects with church. But if we are just talking in terms of life units, the comparison of the amount of time that we spend gathering together as Christians on Sunday and midweek to do church together, and we compare that with the time that the average person is likely to spend in a work environment, we basically spend about 10 times more of our lives in the workplace than we do doing church together.

So when we think about it in those terms, it's quite clear that the workplace really, really does matter. That it's where our Christian discipleship hits the road. That's where we have to work it out. You may have heard this kind of analogy, but some people have said that perhaps we need to think of church, the experience when we gather as church, as almost a bit like half time in a sports match for a team talk. We go over the first half of the game, we assess the mistakes we've made, we own those mistakes, and yeah, okay, I could have done that better. Yeah, there's a weak point there. But we also look ahead at the second half, and we frame strategy and think, how can we do better? We're going to win this. Well, the point is, is that, you know, whether we are working, or whether we're retired, or whether we're raising children, or full-time caring for a loved one, whether we're between jobs, or whether we're in training, or whether perhaps we're prevented from working because of illness, Christian faith is about whole-of-life discipleship.

Yes, it's important for when we come together, and we worship together, and we learn about what the Bible has to say to us. But discipleship is worked out throughout our whole lives.

[5 : 2 8] Yes. That's where the rubber hits the road. That's where we think it through. Our faith is not so much about where are we and what are we doing at half past ten on a Sunday morning, but where are we and what are we doing at half past ten on a Monday morning. Wherever you are,

whether you're in a work environment, or one of those other things, or something I haven't mentioned, but, you know, wherever you are, be assured of this one fundamental truth.

It may not always feel like it, but God's there. He's present. And the challenge facing us is how we discern that presence in that environment. Now, today we're thinking specifically about working environments. It's a huge tragedy when often we might come across that phrase where someone may say, well, you know, I work to live. I don't live to work. When that's said, obviously, it's a comment on perhaps getting priorities right. But there's a certain tragedy, I think, reflected or echoed within that statement, because it suggests how work can become just something that's a means to an end. Something that we've just got to get through because we just need to make income.

We've got to live. We've got to, which is true, but if that's the only way that we look at our work, perhaps we need to ask some questions. A few weeks ago, I think I shared an image here on a Sunday morning where I was thinking about God's presence and how sometimes in our lives we may have this sense that we just wish we could press the fast forward button, and we can't. And sadly, perhaps very often, work can feel like that, that we just want to press that fast forward button, just want to get it over with. There was a business in Detroit where in an office there was a notice on the bulletin board and it said this, the management regrets that it has come to their attention that workers dying on the job are failing to fall down. This practice must stop as it becomes impossible to distinguish between death and the natural movement of the staff. Any employee found dead in an upright position will be dropped from the pay roll forthwith. It may not be present, obvious to us, but God is present in that work environment, even if it may be something that at times we must just dread.

No matter how mundane, and this applies to whatever we're talking about in life, whether it's about our workplace, whether it's about home life, whether it's about anything, anything at all in our lives, it's in those mundane places that the challenge to each of us is to discern what it means to work out our discipleship, because God is present there. And Galatians 5, and that passage that Tina read to us just a moment ago, is not addressing specifically the workplace environment, but it is addressing our whole of life experience, where Paul says that, you know, we must walk by the Spirit, we must keep in step with the Spirit. In other words, he's saying that wherever you are, whether that's the workplace or somewhere else, the Holy Spirit is there. Our challenge is to discern that presence and to work alongside, in step with the movement of the Spirit, to discern the presence of the Spirit and to keep in step with that presence. And this isn't just an abstract set of ideas.

Paul paints this out quite explicitly when he talks about the fruit of the Spirit, where he gives a vision of what this looks like. Surely this is a challenge to every single human being on the planet. It's not abstract. This is what discipleship looks like. He says it's love, it's joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. So coming back to those figures earlier on, 1% in church, 10% in the workplace, what does that look like for each of us?

[9 : 51] Well, let me come back to the ice cube tray and the Titanic. Now, I'm guessing that you might be thinking that the connection there is that the sinking of the Titanic involved a chunk of ice.

It did. But that's not really what this image is about. It's what happened next. Because the Titanic was built, in order to withstand sinking, it was built with, in the hull, there were 16 separate compartments. And the idea was that if the ship was damaged and water started coming to the hull, then if one of those compartments was to flood with water, it would be fine because there were still the other 15. And what happened when the Titanic sank is that one compartment filled with water. And then another did. So there were two. And then three. And then four. And the boat was designed that, in fact, three or four of those compartments could actually be filled and the boat could still stay afloat.

Except that's not what happened. Six compartments were flooded. And if you imagine this little tray here, if you were to pour water into one compartment, it would stay in that one compartment. But sooner or later, it would just overflow into the next one. And then the next. And then the next. And that's actually kind of what happened with the hull of the Titanic. Until eventually those six compartments were flooded.

And down it went. When it comes to our lives, probably most of the time we do this subconsciously, but we compartmentalise things.

[11 : 46] We might be, even perhaps without noticing, we kind of come into one environment, perhaps such as this, which may be a very prayerful environment, a very spiritual environment. But

it becomes a compartment.

And then we find ourselves at 10, 30, 11, whatever it is, on a Monday morning, and we're somewhere else. That may be a workplace environment, it might be something else. But whatever it is, it becomes another compartment.

And the challenge for each and every one of us is to stop compartmentalising our lives. And to understand that whatever, wherever we are, God is there.

And the challenge that we each face is how do we discern the presence of God in each of those compartments, the presence of the Holy Spirit, that in those compartments where it is far more difficult and challenging to walk by the Spirit and to keep in step with the Spirit.

That's a challenge. And it's a challenge to each and every one of us. But I want to share just one more image with you.

[13:04] Because I'm guessing that as we think about the theme of work and the work environment, that I dare say it's inevitable that some of you listening to this will be thinking, I'm just dreading going to work this week.

I don't know what lies ahead. Or maybe it's a longer term view of things and the sense of the unknown. And just longing to know that somehow God is in it.

But I want to finish with just sharing you a story. It's one you may have heard me share before, but I think it's relevant. And it took place during the Second World War, during one of the bombings. A building was on fire and there was a young boy on the first floor.

The building was burning. He couldn't get out. The only way he could get out was to jump out of the window. Because he looked out, it was a dark night and the smoke was so dense that he couldn't see anything.

And as he coughed and spluttered, he heard the voice of his father shout out from the ground. And he said, just jump. The boy shouted out, yeah, but I don't want to jump.

[14:16] It's a long way. I'm terrified. The father shouted back, I will catch you. The boy shouted out, but I can't see you.

And the father replied, no. But I can see you. And that's all that matters. That's all that matters. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Lord, as we think about our whole lives, help us to discern your presence.

Lord, help us to remember that though we cannot always see you, you can see us.

Lord, help us not to compartmentalise our lives. Help us not to make a spiritual and secular divide.

[15:43] Help us to understand that you are present everywhere and in everything in our lives.

Lord, we pray for the places where we work.

And in the stillness of this moment, let's just hold in our prayers. For those who are working, hold before God in prayer right now an image of your workplace.

Where you're likely to be tomorrow morning. If you're retired, hold in your prayers those spaces where you used to work.

If you're between jobs right now or training for something, just hold in prayer now the way ahead.

Asking for guidance and clarity. And maybe if your work right now is caring, whether that be for children or for another loved one, just hold that situation in prayer right now.

[17:07] So let's take a few moments as we just hold these images before God. Thank you, Lord, that you go before us.

As we face whatever lies ahead. Help us to know that wherever we are on a Monday morning, you are with us.

Just as you always have been. And always will be. In Jesus' name. Amen.