



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

### **33rd Sunday Year C**

***In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, go on quietly working***

*Readings: Malachi 3: 19, Ps 97, 2 Thessalonians 3: 7-12, Luke 21: 5-19*

For most of my lifetime there have been political debates and occasional upheavals about the Welfare State. As a child born into it and never having known anything different I have been tempted to take it for granted, as I suspect most do. The Welfare State was created to ensure that no-one, through poverty or disability or ill health need be destitute, uncared for or untreated. The Welfare State of post-war Britain was unique only in its comprehensiveness. Its concerns were not new.

Go back to the earliest Scriptural records and you will find extensive laws for the treatment of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant. The earliest harvest festivals (Deuteronomy 6) bear witness to this and Ruth was gleaning in the fields of Boaz among the portion of the crop that he dutifully left unharvested for the poor.

Observe the early Church and you will find one of the earliest disputes was not about whether there should be welfare but how it might be distributed more equitably (Acts 6 v 1f). The very role of Deacon emerged to ensure that welfare was happening (and justly) in the daily life of the parish. Even in the darker days of industrialising England there were Poor Laws and workhouse provision, minimal though it was, to ensure survival. 'Sturdy vagabonds', as they were

quaintly termed, were expected to pull their weight along with the destitute mother and her child.

Wherever there is welfare, of course, there is the temptation to abuse. St. Paul draws attention to this in the Epistle today. He notes that some of the flock, who have cottoned on to how easy it is to be supported by this Christian community, have downed tools and are now battenning on the community. They are not working and they are living off their brothers and sisters in Christ. He describes them in a Greek play on words as 'not working' but 'working around' – not doing business but poking their noses into everybody else's.

Paul reminds them that the rule is simple. If you're not prepared to work then you don't get any food. He proclaims this in Jesus name so we need to take it seriously.

It is, of course, in line with the philosophy of the founding fathers of the Welfare State. It was not introduced as a charter for skivers but as a safety net for the needy.

Most of us, at sometime or another, have been unable to support ourselves and grateful that the whole Christian based society has seen to it that we do not starve or lose our homes. We are co-dependants one of another.

There are times when, like now, people find it hard to get work. Paul's point is not to penalise the willing would be employee but to set a clear line against the determined idler, the man (or woman) for whom welfare, at the expense of his fellow citizens, has become a way of life upon which no thought of contributing by working should intrude.

Not contributing is something that diminishes the person and harms the society or family of which he is a member. So, if we are able, the contribution of voluntary work is as spiritually valuable as that which is financially rewarding.

We live in a world where the complexity of the benefits system means that we are all on some kind of benefit and we must work for a simplification of a system where work can be unattractive or financially pointless or we are awarding ourselves benefits of which we may have no need. It is a massive task of reform that falls upon our political representatives and we must pray for them regularly.

It is vitally important because, as St. Paul points out, benefit systems need to have a clear and beneficial moral purpose. We live in a society that has moved light years from the Hebrew harvest, from the fields of Boaz and from the common table of the early Church but our priority has not altered - the worth, value and engagement of every man and woman both with their own dignity and with the common good.

Work and welfare remain critical ingredients of the Christian commonwealth and the touchstone remains the willingness of everyman to contribute to the common good.

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