

The following sermon was preached by McMullin Lecturer and Online Coordinator of Trinity College Theological School, Dr David Gormley-O'Brien at Trinity College Chapel in April 2013

## **Are Workers human?**

*"I was on the third floor when the building collapsed. All of a sudden, the roof came down. I was trying to run towards the stairs. But the roof came down so quickly, I sat down on the floor near a heavy machine, which helped me to stay alive," Miss Khatun said in a quiet voice.*

*"My sister was also working in the same building, but she was rescued soon after the accident. But I could not come out, and another girl was killed as the building collapsed. I lived inside the debris with her dead body and a few other people [who had survived]," she added.*

*Miss Khatun had a small bottle of water with her, which soon ran out. She said some people started drinking their urine, but that she did not.*

*"One of my colleagues, who was also trapped and was with me, lost her mind and at one point she started to bite me, saying: 'Take me to my son.'*

*"Every moment when I was trapped inside the building, I was waiting for death [to come]. Because there was no hope and the situation was so frightening, I was between hope and despair, between life and death. Sometimes it was even tough to take breath.*

*"I had a mobile phone with me, but there was no network. I was just lying down and during the first three days, I was conscious. But on the fourth day, I [lost consciousness]," she said, crying.*

Merina Khatun, 21, was a sewing operator at a garment factory inside the eight-floor building Rana Plaza which collapsed on the outskirts of Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, ten days ago killing at least 1,000 workers and children. Merina had been trapped inside the rubble for four days. [BBC website]

I have titled this sermon, 'Are workers human?' I have adapted this

title from Dorothy L. Sayers. Sayers, one of the first women ever to graduate from Oxford University, was an Anglican theologian and wrote several detective novels and essays. She wrote one essay titled, "Are women human?" in the 1950s, a very conservative period, a time when men who had returned from active war service replacing women in the workforce. Sayers exposes the hypocrisy of politicians and industry bosses (in those days all male) who treated women as inferior. She is not a feminist, in fact she was very much against strident feminism of her day, but she does demand that women be accepted as human beings first and foremost, and be judged on their merit and their individual skills. Gender is only one of several categories in being human and it is not the most important category. "Every woman is a human being and a human being must have an occupation, if he or she is not to become a nuisance to the world" (p. 33).

Why am I talking about work in a sermon? Shouldn't I be speaking about something more religious? Well, I argue that work is incredibly religious. I am not merely talking about church work like that of priests and bishops. I am talking about work like that of a policeman, a doctor, a teacher, a farmer, a home-maker, a mechanic, and even, no especially, a sowing operator like our Merina Khatun from Bangladesh. In the two letters to the Thessalonians, we find that work is extremely important to the Apostle Paul personally. He is very proud of his work. On two separate occasions he draws attention to the fact that he worked night and day when he visited the church in Thessalonika so that he wouldn't be a burden to anyone (2.9). We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that he was a tentmaker. It was a useful trade and an important part of his identity. Paul castigates Christians who refused to work. These people were off to the fairies with their speculations on the imminent end of the world. What was the point of working? Jesus was coming any day now. Paul is very curt about this nonsense: "if someone does not wish to work, [no problem,] let him not eat!" (2 Thess. 3.10).

Work is incredibly religious because it is an essential part of human

existence. From a Christian perspective, work is a gift from God and we humans, by our very nature, are created to work. Work is not merely a means by which we can acquire goods and services (although this is important); work is an end in itself. Work enables us to be creative; it contributes to our dignity and our self-worth. It is a fundamental right that every human be able to provide for him- or herself and not to be a burden on society.

However, Western society has largely distorted and corrupted the idea of work. We live in a culture that devalues work and increasingly dehumanizes and alienates the worker (both white collar and blue collar). In our free market economy, where the bottom line is more important than the human factor, where work is mere means for production and not an end in itself, where technology is intentionally adopted to replace the need for humans, and, where this cannot be done totally, then we export the jobs off-shore to developing countries, where people work 12-14 hr days for \$50 per month. In this system, workers are not human, they are expendable commodities; they are to be kept powerless and to be used, exploited, and discarded at will.

In the papers we read that the citizens of Dhaka are calling for the public execution of the factory owners who compelled their workers to enter the unsafe factory at Rana Plaza. But these men are not the culpable ones here. We consumers in the West are equally culpable. The clothes being made in this sweat shop were Western brands destined for our department stores to satisfy our insatiable desire for ever cheaper clothes. We happily embark on retail therapy oblivious to the possibility that we may be fuelling wide-scale exploitation and destroying human lives.

The exploitation of workers in developing countries is cognate to the issue that faced the abolitionists of the 18th and 19th centuries. Dorothy L. Sayers asks, Are women human? We are asking, are workers human? The abolitionists, many of whom were Christians from the lunatic fringe of the church, like the Clapham St sect, asked, Are negroes human? They prevailed against

overwhelming odds in forcing change on an economic system that was very dependent on slave labour. The abolitionists tackled the issue on many fronts. One of these was to try to persuade people to boycott the use of sugar (a product of slave labour from the West Indies) which was just coming into vogue with men gathering together in the new coffee shops springing up in the major cities and middle-class ladies idling their time at tea parties. The abolitionists promoted sugar beet (from beetroot) as a traditional sugar substitute thereby undermining the economic basis of the slave industry.

I think we can learn from these Christians of the past by consciously opting out of the consumerist treadmill. We often ask questions of our food - where is it from? Is it organic? Has the animal been mistreated etc? We need to ask similar questions about our clothes. Where were they made? Were workers exploited? We may need to lower our expectation and standard of living and find an alternative to retail therapy and \$10 shirts and dresses made in a sweat shop.

As Christians we need to take a stand so that these tragedies no longer occur because we believe that workers are indeed human, and that even poor workers in developing countries, like our Merina Khatun has a fundamental right to make a dignified living. Incidentally, that is precisely what Merina plans to do. She relates that one positive thing out of her experience working in the Rana Plaza factory is that she learned how to sew. She intends to return to her rural village and continue sewing in her own business. May God bless her.