

Sermon 17 Mai 2009
Rev Nathalie Duermueller

Subject: Ecclesiastes 3,9-15; Romans 9,14-21

Dear Parishioners, dear friends of the Swiss Church

One of the subjects of today's AGM will be the renovation of the Swiss Church building in Endell Street. I am sure that you are all particularly curious to hear more about the progress of this project. People keep asking me: How is the renovation work proceeding? When will you be back in the new church? For the Swiss Church this renovation is a huge undertaking and many people are involved in it. And of course a lot of work stands behind such a project. Some parts of the work are more obvious like the work of the builders on the building site, as we can all see that there *is* something going on and that the project is progressing. Other parts are less obvious like all the paper work that has to be done, the planning for the Opening Event of the new church, which involves a lot of volunteers or the work that the donors have done that makes the financing of this project possible, etc, etc. Without the work of all those people and especially without the work of all the volunteers there would never be a newly renovated Swiss Church! This made me ponder about the meaning of work. What is it that makes our work precious and why do we work? Recently this kind of question has also come up a lot in the media, as lots of people have lost their work over the last months. When people lose their jobs, be it because of being made redundant or because of retirement this is a moment when many have to realize to what a high extent our identity is related to what we do. For many it seems to be true that "I am, because I work". I am personally glad that the Bible offers us a different concept to this very common belief. These biblical ideas can help us to put our work in the right perspective.

Today we heard a reading from the book of Ecclesiastes. This book is also called Kohelet, which means "preacher" and was written about 2250 years ago. The author of this book wants to remind the reader of the caducity of life. His point is that everything comes and goes and nothing lasts forever therefore this makes him think about the meaning of a human being's labour. He asks in verse 9:

“What profit has the worker from that in which he labors?”

First this sounds a bit like a rhetorical question that is being asked just to let us realize that we actually don't have any profit from our work. But a closer look at the text shows that it is not as simple as that. Obviously he *does* question the meaning of work but he does more than that: He puts work into relation with time. In verse 11 he says:

¹¹ “God has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.”

So we have work on one side and the factor of time on the other. Time is described as “eternity” and as “from beginning to end”. He therefore considers human effort in relation to the overall picture: Somewhere in between the beginning and the end of this world and in between the beginning and the end of our personal lives there is our work. What happens if we think of work in this context? It becomes very tiny all of sudden: What is our work compared to eternity? What is the newly renovated Swiss Church compared to the beginning and the end of the world? Nothing, rien, nada! Scary to realize that— isn't it? Having said that the preacher quickly comes up with a solution to that rather inconvenient statement, he says:

¹² “I know that nothing *is* better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, ¹³ and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it *is* the gift of God.”

What a surprising conclusion – it is actually not very obvious that a text like this one can be found in the Bible. The preacher invites us to enjoy our lives and to make the most of it by taking pleasure in the gifts of God. I'm wondering how the reformer John Calvin would have interpreted this passage, but that's another subject...

Anyway so the first important factor when we think about the meaning of work is *time*. The second one is the relation of work to *God*. It says in verse 14

¹⁴ “I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it.”

This basically tells us that if God does the work then it shall be forever. What a relief – this means that we don't have to worry about the endurance of our work. Instead we can assume that if it is in accordance with God then it will remain. This is particularly true for the work of a church. The Reformed Church as it is today might lose more and more active members but we shall hope that the message will always endure. One main reason why we are doing the renovation of our church building is that we hope that future generations can make use of this building and that many people will benefit from this church space over time. Of course we are not renovating just for us but this project has to be seen in a much wider context. Sometimes I start thinking: Will there be enough people going to church so we can justify all the energy and the money that is being invested in the project? What will the future of our church be like when our congregation is getting older and older? There it helps me to remember that it is not only *us* doing all the work, but it is only the mercy of God that will make this church flourish. In Romans chapter 9 it says:

¹⁶ **So then *it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.***

Therefore: whatever effort we make, however hard we try – it is not about us, but it is about God. I like this thought very much because it makes clear that there is in our work always a factor *x* - something that we can't completely control. The awareness of this can teach us to be humble. We human beings tend to like the feeling of being in control. But we have to realize that not *everything* is up to us. That's why we should put our work always in relation to God.

As a result according to Ecclesiastes we have so far two factors that define our work: time and God's grace. I would now like to add a third one which is the *personal meaning* of our work. Whenever people do the type of work that they are personally convinced of then this work will flourish. That's the reason why I think that it is very precious to be involved in some kind of voluntary work. People choose this work completely freely because they are doing it for a good cause and probably because they see the bigger context of the project they are involved in. As I said in the beginning the Swiss Church is completely dependant on voluntary work – our church could simply not exist without the work of all those volunteers who invest their time and their

passion for this church. Especially now with this big project that we are so close to coming to terms with – the work of volunteers becomes even more important. There will be a lot of smaller and bigger tasks to be done around the opening of our church. And I am hoping that many of you will join us to support and carry out this project. I also hope that the volunteers do this work not only because they somehow believe that work defines their identity but mainly because they see the wider context of the Renovation Project of the Swiss Church. This is a kind of work that will not last forever but it is still a project that will hopefully go on when we are all long gone. And it is a unique chance for us now that we can be part of it. Don't we have therefore many reasons to celebrate and to enjoy life? It is indeed a special moment for the Swiss Church and it is a special moment for all of us who can participate. Or like the preacher expresses it in Ecclesiastes:

¹² “I know that nothing *is* better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, ¹³ and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it *is* the gift of God.”

Amen