

Friday morning saw me doing something strange in the Deanery garden. I took out a spoonful of homemade marmalade and a small bell to our recently-acquired beehive, following an old custom to welcome bees to their new home. I put the marmalade on their landing stage, and then tapped the hive gently and rang the bell. Quietly I said the words 'Little brownies, little brownies, your mistress is here.' Little brownies, little brownies, your mistress is here.

No one owns bees; the best you do is work with them. So it's a courtesy, say some beekeepers. It's called telling the bees. Telling them of any significant changes in their lives. Telling them that I am there to cooperate with them.

Who knows? Perhaps your Dean is becoming a little bonkers. Not just the Green Dean, but the Doolally Dean. But perhaps it's a way of showing some respect to fellow creatures. And – you never know – perhaps more honey.

I'm learning. I already know how to give them enough feed. I check them every day to make sure no deadly wasps are getting in to steal the honey. I watch, delighted, as the bees return over the Abbey walls, legs laden with pollen. I hear the low buzz of activity within the brood box and the super as the hive settles down. I'm learning about their complex community life: how each bee takes its own role – as guard, nurse, worker, drone, queen. I love the cooperation; the working together as a whole. How all the individuals make one body, thinking, feeling, existing as one entity. Already I can see how hives have their own corporate personality. Some are sweet-natured; others grumpy, easily stirred to aggression. How you treat them can make a real difference. If you're anxious or fearful, they pick it up. They don't like sudden movement, loud noises, upset. They like to be told what's going on, calmly and respectfully.

For a hive to function well, all its members need to know what to do; what their role is, how to contribute. The whole is greater than its parts; the hive comes first, over the needs of any one individual. Co-operation, working together, is sweet. Lessons in wisdom can be learned from studying bees.

Here is Pope Pius XII addressing a group of beekeepers in 1948:

Ah, if we could and would listen to the lesson of the bees: if we ... learned to do by intelligence and wisdom what bees do by instinct—how much better the world would be!

Working like bees with order and peace, we would learn to enjoy and have others enjoy the fruit of their labours, the honey and the wax, the sweetness and the light in this life here below.

As for you, my beloved, who while bending over your beehives perform with all care the most varied and delicate work for your bees, let your spirits rise in mystic flight to experience the kindness of God, to taste the sweetness of His word and His law, to contemplate the divine light nourished by the melting wax, which the mother bee produced for the substance of this precious light.

The Pope draws out that common connection made between bees and work. We talk about being as busy as a bee and yes, to watch the constant activity of a hive is to delight in a well-ordered micro-society where all know what needs to be done, and all fulfil their roles as ordained. Cooperation. Working together. What can we learn from the bees?

In 2014 one of our foremost theologians, the Dean of Jesus in Cambridge, died tragically in a car crash on the way home from an ordination service at Salisbury Cathedral. John Hughes had written on work, on its significance to us in our humanity. How ultimately our work is the gift of cooperation with God.

For the life of faith ... when we have done everything, offered all our work, we must still say that 'we are unprofitable servants', precisely because all true work, inasmuch as it participates in God's work, is not ours but is given to us. Likewise, while we can have no control over the issue

of our labour in this life, cannot secure it against being thwarted; nevertheless, we trust, in the hope of the Resurrection, that no work will ultimately be lost.

Many, many people in today's world have no work. Or are stuck in jobs where there is no satisfaction, or pleasure, or rest. Many people are dehumanized by what they have to do, by the lack of any real meaning. Not work but drudge: long, repetitive, badly paid, stressful. Too many today are little more than slaves, atomized, cogs in a machine. No sense of human cooperation to fulfil a common goal. Nothing produced of value. Too many live and work solely to deliver profit for others, who are more greedy than they should be.

St Paul, the tentmaker. Had he also kept bees? Perhaps! He knew more than most the importance of cooperative living and working together. His letters are full of what it means to live as the Body of Christ, where many members make up the whole. He gave a new vision for society. Paul realised that in Jesus Christ a new way of being together had been initiated. This now was a social body where a new ethic, a new way of living, working, breathing, praying together had been inaugurated. Such new communities contribute to the saving work of God in the world.

It's clearly discerned in that marvellous little letter that he wrote to a friend of his, Philemon, about a slave called Onesimus. It is a little letter: we heard pretty much the whole thing as our second lesson. In it Paul, who is in prison, is trying to persuade his friend to see and treat Onesimus differently. No longer as a slave, but now as a disciple of Christ. The name Onesimus means 'useful', and Paul tells Philemon that this slave can be useful in a different way, as he has now become a follower of Jesus, a child, Paul's own heart. This slave was useless, *achrestos*, but now he is indeed useful, *euchrestos*. Can you hear the wordplay that Paul is employing? Onesimus was without Christ, *achristos*; now he is *euchristos*: full of Christ. In Christ social relations are transformed. There is now no longer the former owner and slave; for now people don't own each other as possessions. Now they belong to each other differently because both belong to Christ. As Paul writes elsewhere: in Christ there is no male nor female, no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free.

St Paul understood that Christian communities were called to live out something radically different to the social hierarchies and accepted customs of the ancient world. In this new world of Christ, owners could accept slaves as equals. We can be confident that Philemon listened to Paul – otherwise, I don't think the letter would have survived. That when Onesimus returned to his household that he was welcomed with opened arms, now a full member of the community that served Jesus Christ. Embraced into the new community, now of equal value in its God-given purpose.

The radical new community in which a slave could be welcomed as equal challenges us. For God wants our cooperation as we live and work in the world. We need always to focus away from our individual selfish needs and offer our best to make a better world. It's then that our discipleship as the Body of Christ begins to count in God's eyes.

We do much; we can always do more to be *euchristos*, full of Christ. More, as individuals, as a Church, to enhance the lives of others. More for those for whom each day is drudge. More for those who have no work. What more can we do with passion to help those who struggle? To express our kindness to those who are vulnerable? Our challenge to those who perpetrate working practices that dehumanise others?

How do we cooperate with God's work of salvation in the world? For it is that work, as John Hughes wrote, and now knows, which ultimately counts.

As bees work together to produce honey to sweeten life, and wax to enlighten the world, how do we bring sweetness and light to others, to God's greater glory?