

This from a medieval treatise on 'how ladies and demoiselles should conduct themselves and especially 'those who live on their lands ...with respect to their households

'She will insist that her labourers get up early. If she is a good manager she won't depend on anyone else to see this but arise early herself, put on a cloak, go to the window and watch there until she sees them go out, for labourers usually are inclined to laziness. She should often take her recreation in the fields to see just how they are working for many willingly stop raking the ground beyond scratching the surface if they think nobody notices. There are plenty of workers capable of sleeping in the shade of a willow tree in the field, leaving the work horses or the oxen to graze by themselves, caring only that by evening they can say that they have put in their day. The good housekeeper must keep her eyes wide open ...' (Christine de Pisan, The Book of Three Virtues, quoted in Medieval Women by Henrietta Leyser p287)

The workers were wise to this on a farm I worked in many years ago to earn some holiday money. Every time the boss turned up they stopped working and gathered respectfully around him to listen to what he had to say. He eventually cottoned on that they would only work when he wasn't there. What we have in both examples is an issue of trust and of seeing faith as not inspired by fear but by love. God trusts us to get on by trusting in God.

'When a man has had a great deal given him, a great deal will be demanded of him: when a man has had a great deal given him on trust even more will be expected of him' (Luke 12: 48)

It's not the detail of what we do which is primary here, but rather the spirit in which we do it, the desire we have to use God's gift of trust, of faith in us, wisely or, in short, of being a channel of God's love, of being that love that God is and has entrusted to us bearing in mind Luke Timothy Johnson's dictum that 'The opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.' So the action we are called to is primarily one of being so secure in the knowledge and reception of God's love that we are not constantly looking over our shoulder in case God should suddenly catch us out and cast us into hell – the sort of fear that pervades unjust societies where people are forever expecting that knock on the door in the middle of the night which can only mean disaster, being disappeared, tortured to death. This is not the God in whom we trust. Our trust, our faith is rather one in which the glory of God is made manifest

'for by the same act with which you took vengeance on our foes (you can read that as the defeat of sin within each of us) you made us glorious by calling us to you' (Wisdom 18:8),

and that glory is a 'light reflected from one face to another' - the unveiled face which allows God's light to shine through, the transparency of trust, and it is this rather than the dull plod of obedience or the grumbling will, the ticking off of a never ending list of duties or even virtues, which is at issue. Or to finish with the words of Pope Francis

' without a love which is trustworthy, nothing could truly keep men and women united. Human unity would be conceivable only on the basis of utility, on a calculus of conflicting interests or on fear, but not on the goodness of living together, not on the joy which the mere presence of others can give .. Faith is truly a good for everyone, it is a common good. It's light does not simply brighten the interior of the Church ' (Lumen Fides 51)'.

This, remember, from a man who has seen his own society almost destroyed by military and economic forces which had only money-making in mind – where trust was no longer allowed.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour