



Making the Connections

Luther once remarked that God milks cows. He works through the hands of those whose vocation it is to serve in this way (WA 44,6). Many Christians have a good understanding of how their faith influences their sense of right and wrong at work. They know that they shouldn't lie, cheat or steal. They know that they should do an honest day's work for a day's pay. But there is more to a Christian understanding of vocation than obeying the ten commandments. Why is God interested in something as mundane as milking cows?

As we reflect theologically on our roles in family, society, and church we ask questions such as, 'How does this activity reflect God's work and will for his world?', 'What other benefits does God bring about, directly or indirectly, from this activity?', and 'At what points does the word of God intersect with the issues that are being raised?' Theological reflection involves understanding what we do from God's viewpoint.

God continues to order his creation for the good of all. He is concerned that we should have bread to eat, and to do this he uses the service of farmers who grow the wheat and harvest it, millers who make it into flour, bakers who make the bread, drivers who transport it, and the shop-keepers who sell it, as well as many others who provide support services by inventing, constructing and repairing the necessary buildings and machinery, or

helping the businesses to run through banking and accountancy services. Getting a loaf of bread onto my table is complicated work.

In this series of articles we will consider the stories of a number of fictitious people engaged in their everyday tasks. Betty and Fred have retired from employment, Mary is a mother, Dan is unemployed, Ethel is a clerk, and Stan repairs roads.

Joan the Check-Out Operator

Joan is a check-out operator in a supermarket. In the past she entered the prices of the merchandise into a cash register. Now she scans bar-codes. For a long time it was 'just a job'. She needed the job to be able to feed and house her young family. It didn't pay very well, but she had no qualifications, so it was the best she could get.

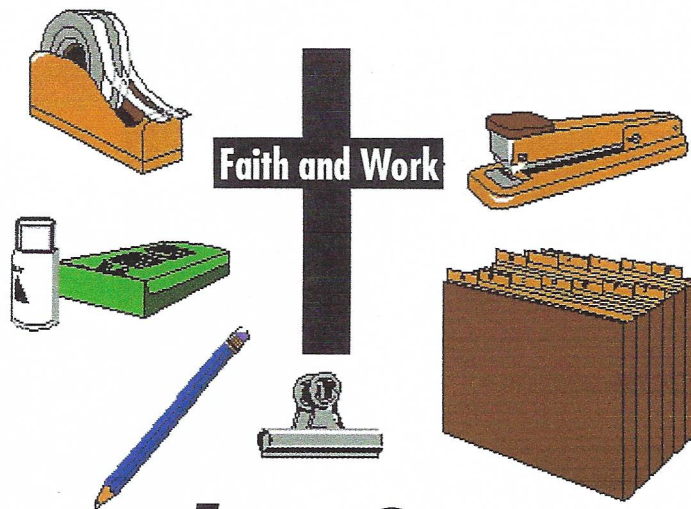
Then her pastor preached a series of sermons on 'serving God in the workplace', and she began to think more deeply about what she was doing. She was part of a vast enterprise that delivered food, and other basic necessities of life, to a lot of people. As she did her work, God was also at work feeding people. Because people had a ready access to food and other necessities, they were able to do many other useful things that also served God's purposes. Her service helped them to look after their families and gave them strength to work and serve in all sorts of ways.

Just thinking about it made her excited. One lady she knew worked as a

volunteer with disabled children in the local hospital. One man was a doctor, another belonged to her church and gave a lot of his time to sharing his faith with his workmates. A number of families had become members as a result. They all shopped at her supermarket, and Joan had come to see that she was therefore helping them in all the other things they did. As she did her part, they were able to do theirs. More importantly she had realised this was all part of God's plan. He called her to work as a check-out operator so that all these other things could happen as well.

As a result, Joan's life began to change. As she scanned she often prayed silently for her customers, that God might bless the work that they had to do. She also started looking forward to coming to work. That surprised everyone, herself included. She had found a new purpose in her work. Then the manager had come and asked her to consider being trained for an assistant manager's position. That would mean more money, which she could certainly use, but it also presented new possibilities for service. She had noticed a few things that she thought could be done better so that it was easier for their customers. She might have the opportunity to do something about it. Truly God had been good to her.

— Dr Steen Olsen
Palmerston North, NZ



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Part Two

The church does not have a good track record when it comes to helping its people make connections between their faith and their vocations. In recent times there have been more official statements, books and study courses. That is good. However, there are still many people in our pews who separate their church life from their work life. Most of the literature focuses on vocations, like the healing and teaching professions, that have traditionally been related to the purposes of God, or on senior positions where the worker has considerable input in shaping his/her workplace.

Australian Robert Banks was part of a working group that conducted an ongoing study of 'the relationship that should exist between a person's social and religious values and ethical frameworks in the public administration process' in the Australian Public Service in Canberra. It was limited, however, by the fact that the participants (apart from a couple of theologians) were all very senior public servants or politicians. They had considerable influence in the shape of their work. It is important for them to study and wrestle with the issues that confront them. There is no question about that, and the group made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of private ethics in public administration. However, what about the low level clerk in the department of defence? What is the significance of

his/her work? How is it a vocation or calling from God?

Robert Banks has recently edited another book, *Faith Goes to Work — Reflections from the Marketplace*. Once again, it is an excellent collection of workplace reflections by Christians at work. The contributors are listed as a computer software writer, a television journalist, a builder-developer, a business owner, a bank manager, a teacher, a farmer, and a craft-worker. We need to hear their stories, but where are the factory workers, cleaners, labourers, and shop assistants? More work needs to be done in understanding vocation from the viewpoint of those who do not have a great influence on shaping the work that they do. We need to help ordinary workers wrestle with these issues so that they can make connections between their faith and their work. Ethel's story is an example.

Ethel the Clerk

Ethel was a low level clerk in the Department of Defence. She mostly shuffled paper and sometimes made people cups of tea or coffee. She was in the purchasing section and handled office supplies for all the others who worked in the large building. The other workers filled out requisitions for paper, typewriter ribbons, pens, a wide variety of forms, and minor equipment such as staplers and hole-punches. She ordered them and they were distributed from the warehouse. Major items such as

computers and desks were handled by her boss.

No-one could work out why Ethel was so cheerful. The last two people in that post had lasted less than a year. One was promoted, the other resigned in frustration. Ethel just sang. When the other girls finally bailed her up in the lunch-room and asked what was the matter with her (or rather why she was so happy doing such a dead-end job) she told them she was working for God.

They backed off in a hurry, but she called them back, and told them that she believed that her work was important in God's plans for his world. The Department of Defence helped provide some order and security in a world that was often a very unstable place. God wanted people to be able to live at peace. He provided order in his world, and she helped with that task. Her work was small, but significant. She helped make the work of others possible. Because she did her job well, others experienced less frustration in theirs. They could count on her. When they let her know what was needed, she would do everything in her power to make sure it was there. She had a lot of friends.

Ethel also told the others she thought that one day she would probably do something else, at least she hoped so. However, until then she was content to serve God doing what he had called her to do. God had been good to her.

— Dr Steen Olsen
Palmerston North, NZ



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Part Three

Betty and Fred who Retired from Paid Employment

Fred had worked hard all his life. Too hard. Just before retirement he had been brought up short by a quote his pastor had used in a sermon. Lee Iacocca, the head of the Chrysler Corporation had said, 'No-one ever lay on his death-bed wishing he had put more time into his business'.

Work had been Fred's life. He managed to get through two marriages along the way. Both his former wives had complained that he was really married to his company. His children were now getting back in touch, but for a long time they wanted nothing to do with him. Now he had sold his company and was moving into retirement. He had married Betty about ten years earlier, and they were truly happy. Both had their own lives to live. Now, he wondered, would he break up his third marriage because he suddenly had a lot more time to spend with Betty. What did retired people do anyway? He was never much of a gardener or handyman, he didn't bowl or play golf, and he had been far too busy for much reading or television.

Six months after his retirement, Fred understood a lot more. He had attended a retirement seminar run by his church. They talked about the vocation of retirement. The whole concept of 'vocation' had been new to him. Though not particularly materialistic, he had been far too busy to think about why he worked as hard as he did,

and how God was interested in his work. That is, of course, apart from the sizeable contribution he made to the church budget. He knew God was interested in that. He came to wish that his congregation had a 'vocation in the workplace' seminar when he had just begun his business. However, as he thought about it, he would have been too busy to attend anyway.

Retirement had opened new doors for Fred and his wife. They were comfortably well off, and had begun to look for new opportunities to serve. The seminar had stressed that in the past, retired people were looked on as needing care, but now they were seen as carers. This issue was not whether one was paid for work, but the service that one's work provided to others. Fred was now part of a group of retired Christian business-people who were giving their time to help those who had just started their own businesses, or who were in difficulty. He enjoyed the work. He had developed a real sense of God working through him in helping others provide useful services for society, without going broke in the process.

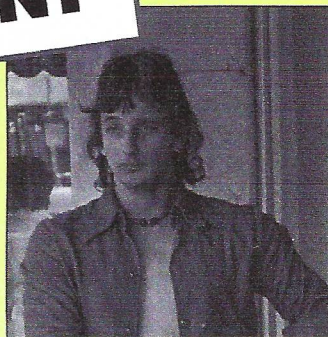
Often these young families were in disarray. Both parents worked, and seemed to lack the domestic skills that Fred and Betty had previously presumed would be passed on to all children by their parents. Betty often helped them develop the skills to

manage effectively their households and parent their children. That led to other contacts, and Fred soon discovered that he had more practical skills than he imagined.

Another unexpected thing had happened in their church life. They had been asked to become 'grandparents' for an outreach ministry to single parent families. At first they were frightened, but they soon settled in and enjoyed the contact. Some of the families had begun worshipping and most Sundays they now had one or other of the new 'grandchildren' sitting on their knee. Often Betty would be given a crying baby to hold, because she had a much more calming effect on them than the distraught mother.

Life was good. Betty and Fred had come to realise that in their retirement God had given them a whole new vocation. What was more, for the first time in their married lives, they had been called to work together. They loved it! Their relationship blossomed. Sometimes they found themselves behaving like a newly-married couple. Walking hand in hand through the Botanic Gardens on a summer's evening was something they hadn't done since they were courting. They really enjoyed one another's company and realised they were looking forward to growing old together. Truly God was good.

— Dr Steen Olsen
Palmerston North, NZ



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Part Four

Dan the Unemployed Person

Dan's life did not go the way he planned. At least it hadn't recently. He was married to Sue, who was expecting their second child, when his company went bankrupt and he became redundant. At first it didn't hit him. He thought he would soon get another job, but then he discovered that all the other employees of his old abattoir were also looking for work. There were only so many jobs available for ex-freezing workers, and he missed out. Three months later, there he was, redundant at twenty-eight! He was meant to be reaching his peak, but found himself on society's scrap heap instead.

At first he had been angry and bitter. It was not his fault. Then he began to pray hard. If only God would give him another job, he would clean up his life and be much more generous in making his offering. However, God was apparently not prepared to make a deal. Dan really felt down about the time when little Ben was born. Sue hit some post-natal depression soon afterwards. There they were, a pair of matching bookends — their income slashed to the breadline — feeling guilty and useless much of the time.

Dan sat up and watched television half the night, then he slept till midday, or when the children woke him. They started to argue. One day Sue threw a cup at Dan. It missed, but the incident scared them both. They decided to get help. They called their pastor and he

sent around someone from the Pastoral Care Team in the congregation.

Their pain and frustration poured out of them. Then their fears began to surface. What if Dan didn't get another job? How would they raise their children? Would their marriage last? They confessed that they had stopped going to worship services because they felt so ashamed when Dan couldn't get another job. There had been great support when the Works closed down, and many people were in the same boat. Some soon found work again. Everyone was rejoicing. Sue and Dan felt excluded. Then it occurred to them that they were the problem, so they dropped out.

As they talked and prayed, the despondency began to lift. Dan began to see that God had called him to be much more than a abattoir worker. He was a husband and a father. He also served as secretary of the local football club, and was a leader in the church youth group. Well, he was until he stopped going. He came to realise that God was just as pleased with his service in these areas as he had been with his paid employment. He got involved again, and so began to hear his heavenly Father say 'well done'. His motivation to find work returned, but he was knocked back again and again.

He had been unemployed for about six months when things took a decisive turn. Dan was lying awake one night, turning it over in his mind. He had just

about dropped off to sleep when, like a bolt of lightning from a clear blue sky, the thought struck. When their first child was born Sue was always saying she would go back to work as a teacher as soon as it was possible. He wondered if she still felt that way. There was a shortage of teachers in the town. The next morning he asked and she admitted that she had been thinking about that too, but was afraid to suggest it to Dan. She thought his already fragile male ego might not survive.

Sue went back to work and Dan looked after the children and housework. At first he was just shocked at how much there was to do. Then he began to enjoy his time with the kids. He loved to tell Sue about their progress when she came home from school. He realised how far he had come when one evening he ran into Stan at the pub. He was a workmate from his time at the abattoir. Stan was a smart-alec who got his laughs at the expense of others. Dan was amazed that it didn't bother him at all when Stan introduced him as a 'house-husband'. God had answered Sue and Dan's prayers in ways that they hadn't even thought possible. They were due to reassess their situation in a year's time. However, Dan already knew that he wanted the present arrangements to continue longer than that. God was good.

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Part Five

Mary the Mother

Three children under the age of five! Mary's life was no longer her own. In fact, it seemed as if she had forgotten what it was to have 'a life'. Wash, clean, feed, scrub, help, entertain, shop, make peace. It never ended.

Then one Sunday morning, when the kids were in the creche at church, she heard another young mum read a short article called, 'To Be, or Not to Be, an Ordinary Housewife'. It was based on the fruit and gifts of the Spirit, and applied to her everyday life. It changed her life. This is what it said:

When is the fruit of the Spirit abundant? At 3.00 in the morning when she awakes to a screaming two-year-old. There peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are exercised as she removes her fingers from around the child's throat.

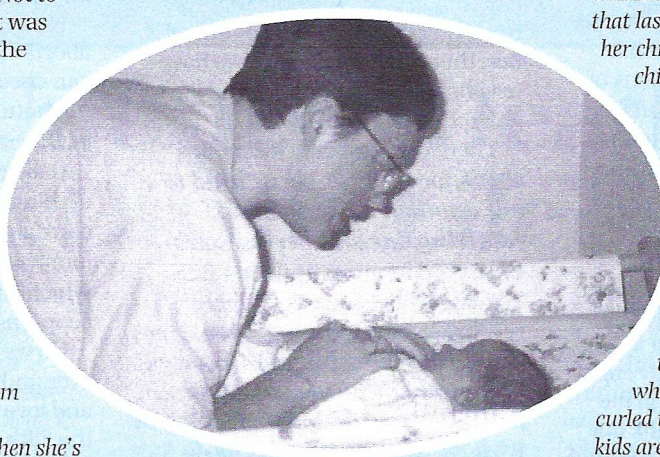
When is she a servant? When she's cooking dinner, helping her kids with their homework, bathing toddlers, re-tidying the house for the tenth time before hubby gets home from work, bringing in the washing, keeping the neighbour's kids amused until their mother gets back from the milk-bar and keeping the cat out of the sausages on the bench, all at the same time.

Where is her mission field? Whatever part of the house she happens to be in at any time. Kids, cats, dogs, husband, the neighbour's kids, the neighbours, the family, friends, delivery men, the post lady, workmen, Bible study groups, and cell groups await to be ministered to by her willing heart (and hands).

When is she a prophet? When she tells her 11-year-old daughter that her crooked teeth will straighten out, that

her hair is beautiful, that she will lose that podgy figure, that she is a beautiful and precious young lady in God's sight, and mum and dad love her very much, and wouldn't trade her for quids.

When does she exercise humility? When she is up to her armpits in dirty nappies, singing to the Lord during the day, and at night when her children throw their arms around her neck and



say, 'I love you mum', as she tucks them into bed.

When is she a teacher? When she tells her son about loving and caring about others and not to be mean and spiteful, but to look out for someone who has not got a friend, and to be one to him.

When does she exercise wisdom? When she is dragging three fighting pre-schoolers off one trike, soothing them with inspiring words about sharing, and showing them to the sandpit with three spades while hiding the trike.

How is the gift of healing exercised? The power of a mother's kiss on the hurt spots gets a bit embarrassing when the child has been bitten on the bottom by an ant, and he comes running over, in a public place, with his undies around

his ankles. Also when administering 'yucky' medicine from the doctor, dispensing band-aids, praying with little girls whose warts will not go away, and when holding a sick child in your arms and being prepared for a very wakeful night when gastro hits the house or someone has croup.

When does she experience joy? Whenever a brand new bundle, red and wrinkled, is placed on her tummy after that last 'push', and every time one of her children's teachers say that her children are so well behaved that they are an example to their peers.

When does she exercise agape love? Every day in every way, and after a hectic day, at bedtime when her husband gives her one of 'those' winks.

When does she express thankfulness? At night time when the lights are out, her man is curled up and snoring next to her, the kids are all tucked up in their beds, and the house is peaceful. Then she thanks God for the privilege of being 'an ordinary housewife'.

[Carol Fleckhammer — used by permission]

Mary still finds it all a bit much at times. She sometimes feels down, and seeks out some adult company. However, through it all, she has a much deeper appreciation of what God is doing through her to serve her family. She knows that one day she will probably be back in paid employment, but meanwhile she believes God has called her to be 'an ordinary housewife'. It is her vocation. Sometimes she thinks she achieves much more for God's world in this role than she did when she was working as a nurse.

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Palmerston North, NZ

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Conclusion

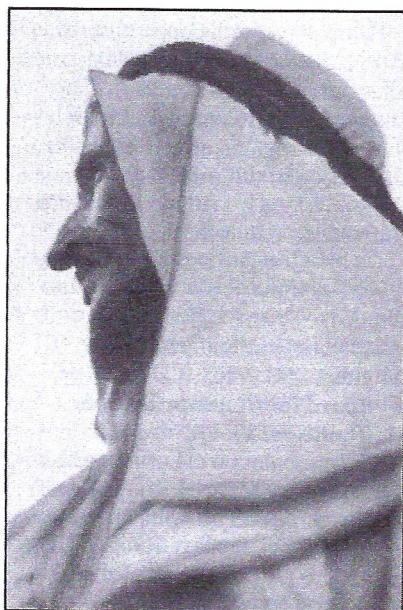
A Biblical Overview

God is concerned with the whole of life. He calls out a people who are to live together in relationship with him in the world. The nation of Israel is chosen, called and set apart for the purposes of God in the world. Within the nation individuals are also called to specific tasks. Moses, the prophets and the judges are prime examples. Sometimes they received an obvious divine call before they began their work, at other times they discovered God's call in the process of their work. Joseph and Nehemiah are examples of the latter.

Joseph is forced, against his will, into slavery in Egypt. As a result of God's blessing, he finds himself in charge of Potiphar's household. His master's wife attempts unsuccessfully to seduce him and then lies about him and has him thrown into prison, where once again he rises to leadership. As a result of his correct interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, he is put in charge of Egypt. There he works carefully to store up grain during the seven good years, so that there may be enough to eat during the seven years of famine that follow. As a result of his vocation, his family is also able to survive the famine. When Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, he says:

'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now do not be distressed

and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been



famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then it was not you who sent me here, but God' (Gen 45: 4-8).

In spite of all the information we are given about Joseph, we are not told that God called him to this task

in some spectacular fashion. He had two dreams when he was a teenager that indicated that his brothers and parents would bow down to him. There were no angel choirs or visions given to Joseph, and no other obvious indication that God had called him to rule Egypt. His life was full of injustices and disappointments. Looking back, the writer of Genesis can tell us that he was blessed by God, but when he sat in prison, that was not obvious.

If God did not give Joseph an obvious call to his position, then how can he be said to have a vocation? Joseph discovered God's purposes in the circumstances of his life. He came to understand that God had allowed everything to happen to him so that he would be in the position to do the work that God had called him to. Obviously, God does not always give his servants the sort of call that we are told many of the prophets received.

Nehemiah was a wine-steward to King Artaxerxes of Persia at the time immediately after the exile. A number of Jews had already returned from Babylon to the ruined city of Jerusalem. One day his brother came from Jerusalem and told Nehemiah of the great trouble and disgrace in the city. The city walls were still broken down and the gates burned. This affected him very deeply and he went into mourning. He prayed and fasted and God gave

him an understanding of what could be done, and how the city could be rebuilt (Neh 1: 1–11a).

Nehemiah had a strong sense of purpose, but he had to start where he was, with the present (Neh 1: 11b–2: 2). One day the king notices he is sad and asks him about it. In fear and trembling he tells the king the story. The king invites him to ask for what he wants. He quickly prays and then asks for what he needs. He does this on the basis of the things he deeply values: Jerusalem and God's people and their security. His vision pulls him towards the goal, his values push and prod him onward. His mission has become clear. He is to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls (Neh 2: 5–6). Before he can do this, however, he needs to develop a strategy and make some plans. He needs safe passage through hostile territory, and the materials needed to rebuild the walls and gates of the city (Neh 2: 7–8). He makes the plans and then puts them into action (Neh 2: 9ff), and the rest, as they say, is history. A new future for the people of God is created.

Notice a couple of key points about the process. He began with fasting and repentance. He bathed the whole process in prayer. Not only did he pray at the beginning, he obviously prayed constantly throughout the process (see Neh 2: 4b). He didn't rush from vision to action. He let God shape his values and the way he made detailed plans. In that process of planning and developing a strategy, Nehemiah senses the call of God. He comes to a conviction about what God wants him to do and he gets on with it. Once again we are not told that he receives a vision from God. He discovers God's purposes for his life as he reflects on his concern for the people of Israel and his desire to do something for Jerusalem, which is in ruins.

The question, then, is not when and how the call comes, but that it

is recognised as having come from God. Both Nehemiah and Joseph came to the conclusion that God had given them a vocation, a calling, in which they were to serve him. We can learn much from their example.

In the Old Testament this does not only apply to leaders in the community. Skilled craftspeople are also chosen by God for their tasks in making the Tent of Meeting: ***Then***

Both Nehemiah and Joseph came to the conclusion that God had given them a vocation, a calling, in which they were to serve him. We can learn much from their example.

the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel . . . and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts — to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship" (Exod 31: 1–5). ***Then Moses said to the***

Israelites . . . "[God] has given both him and Oholiab . . . the ability to teach others" (Exod 35: 30, 34).

A specific sense of all being called by God to their everyday occupations is not developed in the Old Testament, but there is a general understanding of the wholeness of life under God and that no work will succeed without his blessing. The psalmist writes, ***'Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain'*** (Ps 127: 1). The prophets also make it clear that God's covenant with the people includes all of life. They insist on honest business practices as well as sacrifice and worship.

The wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) deals with a wide range of everyday concerns, from ethical questions, to home and work-related issues. The whole of life is included in this discussion. The purposes of God intersect with the concerns of everyday life. Our contemporary everyday life differs somewhat from that in Old Testament times. We therefore need to continue to reflect on God's purposes as we wrestle with our everyday issues.

— Dr Steen Olsen
Palmerston North, NZ

Prayer Pointers

Remember the following in your prayers:

- The General President, Dr Steicke, the Vice-Presidents, and leaders of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA), as they guide our church into the third millennium;
- Those who are suffering the devastating effects of widespread droughts throughout the world, especially our brothers and sisters in Papua New Guinea;
- Ask God in his mercy to send rain to the parched lands;

- Those who are about to graduate as new pastors and teachers in the LCA, and their families;
- Students undertaking vital examinations during these weeks;
- Those who are struggling to accept or to come to terms with changes in their lives;
- Children who are ill or 'differently abled', their families, and carers;
- Give thanks for the gift of health, strength, enough food and drink, homes, families and other loved ones.