

Angels in High-Vis Jackets

The phone rang at 5.13am and the first thought, heart pounding was, 'What's happened?'

'Were you awake grandma? , my grandson, knowing my early waking habits, was ringing to ask for a lift for him and his mates for the 6am-2 pm shift. Their promised 'lift' had just phoned to say he wasn't going into work today. This Monday morning I just happened to be still asleep but rose quickly and found myself ferrying four normally boisterous, but now sleepy and quiet 18 year olds to an inaccessible industrial estate outside town. Arriving in the dark at a huge warehouse, we were met by a quiet procession of high-visibility jackets wending its way through the gates of the DHL warehouse.

The four got out with profuse thanks and joined the end of the procession – and my heart went out to them. This, their first job after leaving school, and with little hope of fulfilling employment before them, was grabbed with relief and delight. They don't mind the unsocial hours - 6-2 or 2-10 shifts – they have a job, the dignity of work, a bit of money to give them some independence, and it feels good, makes them feel grown up. And as I watched the throng disappear into the warehouse I wondered about the work they would be doing, hidden, quiet, serving the needs of our consumer driven world.

The job is receiving or picking. Goods come in for one of our well-known high street stores and they are received and stored in a precise way. Orders come in from the store, prompted by a computerised stock management system, and these are 'picked', packed and sent out accordingly. 70 days to Christmas and these quiet angels of the dusk and dawn will be filling the shelves of our shops to entice and offer the promise of seasonal joy and cheer. They have a half-hour break at 8.30am and later, a fifteen minute break. To me the work seems laboured and tedious but these four young men are just glad it is work and they seem to be doing it gladly enough.

As I drove home the high-vis jacketed line stayed with me and I thought not only about the four I'd given a lift to, but all of them working today, each with their own thoughts and dreams and worries, many of them young and hopeful, and I began to appreciate deeply how holy theirs and so many others' work is, how interdependent we are. This morning's scene will be happening in a variety of ways all over our country, and all over the world. The Christmas we will enjoy is dependent on workers from across the world, eager young people like this morning's four, transport workers and shop assistants – a web of connections that makes the world of commerce go round.

I would guess that none of them would see themselves connected in this way, doubt they would see any deeper significance in their work. And yet, this morning, I saw not just their high-vis jackets glinting in the car's headlights, but saw them as very incarnate angels preparing and providing the human joy and expectation of Christmas. Their handling of boxes and packets, their lifting and shifting, their banter and chat – all unnoticed and unappreciated- but filled with a deeper reality and carrying a blessing for us all. How else could the Christmas we have come to expect happen? In terms of Incarnation, could this, be just as holy as the midnight mass I will celebrate I wondered?

And, when Christmas has gone, the January sales finished and business becomes slack once more – will my hopeful early-morning four be 'let go' I wonder ? But for the time being, let them rejoice in their high-vis holiness!

