

6th July 2020

Carpenters

**“Let them live; let them be hewers of wood
and drawers of water unto all the congregation.”**

Bible, Joshua 9:21

The label “hewers of wood and drawers of water” is a somewhat derogatory one. In the working environment, it’s often applied to manual labourers or those who carry out menial tasks. It would be more honest if it became “*only* hewers of wood” because its purpose is to dismiss such workers as drudges, and their tasks as humdrum or unimportant.

The phrase appears in the Book of Joshua, in one of those turbulent periods in the history of the Children of Israel. Joshua had conquered Jericho and now had his eye on Gibeon. But the Gibeonites had tricked the Israelites into making a promise of safety, so when the Gibeonites were defeated and their cities overrun, Joshua was duty-bound to spare them. But, in subjugating them, he said, “Let them live: let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water.” We’ll let you be, but you’ll be treated as the lowest of the low, the scum, the menials, the downtrodden.

Which puzzles me ... I’ve always thought of woodworkers as artisans. Not “hewers”, perhaps, but skilled crafters, woodcarvers, carpenters, who can make beautiful things from any wood that might be to hand.

I love the feel of turned, polished wood. I love to watch a carpenter create something tactile and beautiful out of a gnarled piece of timber. John, who’s a member of our church, makes bespoke furniture from wood with amazing grain and colour, shape and style. And I *love* what he does. But can such a craftsman work without wood being supplied to him? Can carpenters perform their magic without the hewers to provide?

Hewers of wood and drawers of water as menial and unimportant? No! I don’t think so. And any skilled carpenter will tell you the same.

A prayer for today

O Christ, the Master Carpenter, who at the last through wood and nails accomplished our whole salvation; wield well your tools in the workshop of your world, so that we who come rough-hewn to your bench may here be fashioned to a truer beauty of your hand. We ask it for your own name’s sake. Amen. (George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community)

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