

Matthew 20:1-17
Philippians 1:21-end

What is it that we value most in life?

Is it our health, our wealth, or our family? Perhaps it's our sight, our hearing, our home or the countryside? The freedom to travel? Our ability to continue a much loved hobby?

What about Jesus? What value do we place on our relationship with him?...

What value has he placed on his relationship with us?...

In today's Gospel reading, our collective alter ego as disciple, Peter, has got in a grumpy mood. Peter has listened to Jesus encouraging a rich young man to give up everything he owns to follow him, only to watch the same man walk dejectedly away. In doing so, Peter has realised that he and his fellow disciples have done just what was asked of the rich young man, given up everything to follow Jesus. So, he asks Jesus what value has been placed on their obedience, their service, their sacrifice? Effectively he's asking, what's in it for them?

The first part of the answer is that in eternity, the disciples will get to sit incredibly close to God's presence, places of significance. The second part of the answer is that so will everyone else - including those who in human terms are the last to hear, receive and respond to God's call on their lives. The Gospel this morning is that second part of the answer: the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

When the third group of labourers are brought in from the market place in the last hour of the day, there is no mention of money. For some reason no-one had wanted them. But the importance and urgency of this landlord's work is such that they are needed, and valued, for what they can offer. Self-esteem is so important to those who feel their skills are unappreciated, and the anticipated bonus of a small proportion of the day-rate of pay which may just have paid for a meal, would have been an added encouragement to their hour's hard labour on an empty stomach. To unexpectedly receive the full day-rate for that single hour's labour, gives them the additional dignity of early payment, and a wage equal to that of those who had sweated through larger parts of the day.

Jesus was teaching the disciples not to be concerned about what human society said about them giving up their material security to place at the centre of their lives someone who operated at odd's with their traditional faith leaders. Through God's grace they would receive an appropriate reward, but it would require them to be equally generous in their view of those others who would start to follow Jesus much later in time than they. The value they must place on their relationship with Jesus must be such that it really doesn't

matter who joins their fellowship, or when. What matters is that those others are valued identically by God, because of the economy of his amazing grace. The divine economy of love and grace which doesn't relate well to our human economies!

Paul is talking about this divine economy in the passage this morning from Philippians. For Paul it is the fruitfulness of his labour, and the fact that it is for Christ, that keeps him from preferring an early journey through death to God's eternal presence, to his present state, harassed and imprisoned by the Roman authorities. Being valued by Christ so much that he continues to have a role in working for the extension of the Kingdom of Heaven, is in part what keeps Paul alive. Paul, the persecutor of the earliest Christians, now apostle to the Gentiles, was after all he who met Jesus much later than the other disciples; well after the Resurrection of Christ on the road to Damascus! In the economy of God's grace Paul has already received the remuneration, not for his labour, but unasked for, a revelation of love and forgiveness.

God values each of us so highly that we are all offered the same wage; God's love and grace paid for in full by Christ through his death and resurrection. His is really the labour, not ours. If in faith and repentance, we in turn value that so highly as to make it of first importance in our lives, then we will respond to that loving relationship with God by reflecting in our lives the values that Jesus set in his Gospel; we will put the last first, and the first last.

As with many things with our faith, it is the putting it into practice that comes hardest, and the point where we are most likely to identify with those who have slaved through the heat of the day, and forget that we ourselves are among those who have come late to work the vineyard. Like me, you may have grown up in the Christian faith, or you may be someone for who has loved Jesus for decades because of your own Damascus road experience. If so, it can be easy to forget that those who are yet to understand themselves in receipt of the grace we've encountered, are now God's priority, and therefore should be ours as well.

It might not feel like it, but we are still serving our one hour's hard labour in vineyard at the end of the day. We can't therefore act like those who feel cheated of an extra wage, and demand more. God's love and grace **can't** be more than what he gave on the cross. Instead, we must look at where God's priorities **now** lay, and welcome in those being valued by him at **this** moment. And just as those who come to faith in the last weeks and hours of their life are loved and cherished by God as much as us, so too are those who are younger, those just born, their families and friends, those whom we are asked by God to welcome into the field of fellowship with him.

I'm going to give this as a specific example, because this situation is going to happen next Sunday when we have a baptism service. Those children and their families who come for baptism, may be like those who had stood hungry and unvalued in the market-place of this morning's parable. Our role, our labour for this hour, is to value them as much as Jesus

does, because otherwise they won't be able to hear his voice calling them to join the workforce, to understand their own value to him, and understand that he has already died and risen for them.

As with all our children and young people whom Jesus told us not to hinder when they turn to him, we need to put these families first. For example, let us make sure that as many of us as possible are here to give them a really warm welcome. Let us give them the best seats in the house, and not hide them behind a pillar as I understand may have happened sometimes before. We can encourage them to give the service their full attention by doing likewise, remembering the significance of being the community of faith that lives and gathers around them. Likewise, let us make sure that we give them our attention first after the service, and not prioritise the new vicar - he could be around for years to come; they may not be if we don't show them what God's lived-out grace looks like.

As we go forward to receive the bread and wine at Holy Communion this morning, we can do so remembering what it is like to be the ones brought forward to receive an unexpected payment. In the body and blood of Christ, we receive afresh the un-dreamt-of riches of his Kingdom, and once again know ourselves to be forgiven, loved and valued by God, just as we are. God is utterly and endlessly generous, it is what defines him, and we give thanks for that in our worship of him. So we shouldn't be too surprised if he is equally generous to the people that come along behind us, and that he expects us to be likewise.