**Matthew 20:1-16**

**Finding our self-worth in God**

Having a sense of self-worth can be a really big problem for many of us. To feel loved for who we are, and not what we achieve, can be a lifelong struggle.

Being completely honest, it’s certainly something that I struggle with personally: I have quite a low sense of self-esteem and I judge my self-worth far more by my failings than my successes. I don’t need to compare myself to other people because I spend far too many hours, days, weeks and years comparing my real, fallible self to some idealized sense of who I ought to be.

Perhaps some of you may be in the same boat. Perhaps some of you may have a low sense of self-esteem and judge yourselves far more harshly than God does. And perhaps you may not think that you are really worth loving at all…

I have spent a lifetime battling against low self-esteem. And I know that it is a really destructive emotion and it reflects the dark side of the human psyche more than the spiritual reality of God’s unconditional love and acceptance of me.

But getting to grips with such negative feelings, whilst difficult, is crucial for us to mature as disciples of Jesus, which is why Jesus addresses such things in his own teaching.

And this parable of the workers in the vineyard is a good example of that, in which Jesus is encouraging us to find a sense of self-worth not in comparison to others but purely in the relationship that we personally enjoy with God. Our worth, in the eyes of God, is never defined by comparing to others but simply because God loves each one of us equally, for who we are…

Let’s unpack the parable a bit to see what Jesus is saying to us today.

The scene that is set in this parable would have been very easily understood to Jesus’ first hearers. The owner of the vineyard goes to where the day labourers gather to invite them to work. Casual labourers then, as in so many parts of the world now, would all gather together in the morning in one place: the market square for example. And the employers would come round and pick the people who would work for them for the duration of that day.

And this was such an important invitation for anyone who was trying to eke out a living through daily hire. Without a daily opportunity for work, the family would not get fed, the rent would not get paid, there would be no opportunity to save for a rainy day.

The chance to work in the vineyard, as tough as that work would be, was the only way to avoid starvation and homelessness and desperation amongst family members.

And also, I think the opportunity to work would also have given a sense of self-worth and dignity. If you have ever gone a period of time without employment, then you will know the psychological damage that can often do, especially if the period of unemployment is prolonged: there can be a real question of self-worth, a questioning of identity and wondering what the point of life is all about.

Work is important to us all. It provides our basic needs and it gives us psychological strength and a sense of self-worth, a sense of value.

So when Jesus compares the calling of God on our lives to that of the workers in the vineyard in this parable, we see that it is an invitation for us to discover our true value as human beings; to discover a sense of identity, a sense of worth.

God wants each one of us to discover just how valuable we are and to do that, we are invited into a relationship with him and invited into a relationship with everyone else in this community of St Andrew’s: our co-workers in God’s vineyard. Because elsewhere in the Bible, particularly in Isaiah 5, the community of God – his people – is called God’s vineyard. And that is how we are to understand ourselves: as co-workers together, a community together, working in and through the church.

God invites us into the community of the church, his vineyard, and the reward for accepting the invitation is eternal life.

But there is a real twist to the story, of course: it doesn’t matter if you have been a member of the church 20 years, or 10 years or 2 years, or 2 months, or 2 days: the reward is still the same. The reward is eternal life, and so the duration of one’s participation in the church has no bearing on the gift, the reward that God offers us.

But the fact that the duration of service in the Vineyard did not impact the size of the reward is exactly the point that exposes negative human dynamics that are as real for churches today as they were for the first hearers of this parable 2000 years ago.

At the end of the working day, all the labourers come to get paid and whether they have worked all day in the blazing heat, or only for one hour, they all got paid the same. And at that point, those who had worked for longer or harder started complaining about the injustice of such a system in which the new people got the same reward as those who had been around for longer. These people were jealous, they were keeping score. They felt that, because of their long service they had a more exalted position that justified a higher level of reward. They considered themselves to have a greater degree of worth in comparison with the newcomers.

And, of course, this is an attitude that is often prevalent in so many churches, isn’t it?

There are some people in some churches in our world who feel that positions of authority should be given almost as a reward for long service: Church Wardens, PCC members, Chalice Assistants, Treasurers, other Committee members: these are positions that are rewards for long service to the church and, if newcomers take up any of these roles, then more established members can become angry about that. It happens so often in so many churches…

But, of course, the question behind this parable is: “Whose vineyard is it?”

The question is: “Who has the right to define and measure the worth of each worker?”

The vineyard is not owned by the workers – newcomers or long-time employees: the vineyard is owned by someone else. And it is an act of grace on behalf of the vineyard owner to allow any of the workers into his vineyard at all.

Likewise with those churches that struggle as I have mentioned…

The question is: “Whose church is it?”

The question is: “Who has the right to define and measure the worth of each member?”

It doesn’t belong to the congregation or the clergy – it is God’s church. And it is an act of grace on God’s part that any of us are called into his service in the church. God’s grace is a free gift to all and it is not for us to question how God chooses to distribute his grace.

We are not to keep score on how God lavishes his grace. Instead, we are just to remain grateful to God that we have received his grace at all.

We are not to build up a sense of self-worth based on how much or how little we have participated or how long or how short a period of time we have been a part of this community.

God is generous to all, in equal measure. God shows us undeserved grace, freely available to all. He doesn’t care if you have been coming to St. Andrew’s 20 years or 20 weeks: his grace is the same for us all because he loves us all with equal measure. It makes no difference to God if we are priests or Wardens or PCC members or on the coffee rota or just finding our feet in this new community and not actively participating at the present time in any way other than just showing up on a Sunday. Your worth to God is based on the fact, quite simply, that he just loves you for who you are, and you are worth loving for who you are.

And when we receive Holy Communion in a few moments time, that is the ultimate symbol of God’s grace and love for us drawing us into remembrance of the body of Christ, broken on the cross and the blood of Christ, shed for us so that we could experience the grace and love of God for all eternity. We all share a same-sized wafer, we all take the same-sized sip of wine because God’s grace is equal for us all.

And so we come to Holy Communion with hearts full of thanks for the grace and generosity of the Vineyard owner, the owner of this church, the author of our salvation. We come as one body, one community, and share the same grace in equal measure, aware that each one of us is equally loved by God - not because of anything we have done, but just for who we are.