

Sunday 24th September 2023; Trinity 16 Benefice Holy Communion, Ampleforth

One of my favourite contemporary Christian songs has the lyric proclaiming to God, “for you are who you are, no matter where I am.”, recognising that however the world or our circumstances are, God never changes in His mercy, love, and grace.

Sadly though, it is very often a negative emotional response we have when we see someone seemingly doing better than we are or how we perceive them. We might feel resentful if we see people worse off than ourselves receiving support, which we might think undeserved. These feelings have a habit of creeping in, because we naturally tend to think of number one first in life, if we are honest with ourselves.

We also have a tendency, as the Gospel reading today aptly illustrates, to covet and to be resentful of what others receive from God. In the Gospel, the owner of the vineyard asks those who have worked longest for him, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” The point here is that God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness are God’s to give away as He sees fit. That is sometimes a hard message for us to understand and live by. The core message of this parable is that we are all equal recipients of God’s grace, but the scandal of our faith is that we are often covetous and jealous when God’s gifts of forgiveness and life are given to others in equal measure. Therefore, a sense of righteous indignation can be simply hurt selfish pride – which must be replaced by a sense of devotion and service. Jesus reinforces this message when he says that the ‘last will be first, and the first last’. This is the essence of God’s grace, when He rewards and blesses people according to His will and pleasure, not necessarily according to what people think they deserve. This is hard because we are governed by ‘you get what you deserve.’ The system of undeserving grace is foreign to us: God primarily deals with us according to who He is, not according to who we are or what we have done. And He is love, as my song lyric repeats, “You are who you are, no matter where I am”.

The grace of God does not give us more blessing than we deserve - it simply gives blessing to us completely apart from the principle of deserving. This grace should then be especially manifested in service; which is of grace, not human effort, which causes us to expect recognition and reward as in the parable, but because all our service is already due to God; it belongs to Him. · The ability to serve God is the gift of His grace. As we say after our offertory, “All things come of you and of your own do we give you”, or perhaps better put in this context, ‘for your own do we serve you’. · The call to serve God is the gift of His grace, therefore, every opportunity to serve Him is also a gift of His grace.

This parable unearths our human tendency to turn everything into effort and earning, but grace cannot be earned, and the result of God’s justice is that everyone stands as equals before the judgement seat because of Christ—not because of how long or little we’ve been part of the kingdom. Jesus’ point is that we do not get into heaven because we are rich or have worked hard. God will not look at how much or how little we have done because it does not depend on our efforts, it depends only on God and He gives the gifts of Heaven to each person who believes in Jesus Christ and follows and serves Him. Just as He served His Father by caring for people, so we serve God by meeting the needs of those around us, not comparing ourselves with others. Serving others frees us of selfishness because if we only take in and never give out, we will miss much of what He has planned for us. Every minute of service, every time we extend ourselves to those who have need, brings glory to Jesus Christ.

The message today then is twofold and compels us to ask ourselves about our motives as we seek to serve. Are those motives born out of a sense of self-righteous need for recognition and reward or born out of true sense of unselfish service focussed on God and who He is, working through us?

Self-righteous service comes through human effort, true service comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ which allows Him to work through us. Self-righteous service is impressed with the “big deal.” and kudos, and control and power, true service finds it

almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large. Self-righteous service requires external rewards, true service rests contented in hiddenness and anonymity. Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results, true service is free of the need to calculate results and tick boxes. Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve, true service is indiscriminate and offered to all. Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims, true service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need. Self-righteous service is temporary and superficial, true service is for life and receives resilience from the Holy Spirit. Self-righteous service fractures community, true service, builds community for the peace and comfort of all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.