

St Mary's Nottingham

Sunday 13th January 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The question I want us to reflect on for a few minutes this morning is 'How much do you think you're worth?'

On a financial level at the start of a New Year most of us would freely admit that we're worth a little less than we were before Christmas, what with the combination of food and presents.

But on a deeper level how much do we think you are worth as a person – one individual in this vast expansive universe?

Today's Gospel focuses on the occasion at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry when he joins the crowds heading out into the desert to see and hear this strange prophet called John. John has been calling people to turn back to God as a way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus asks John to baptise him. He's very reluctant at first. But Jesus tells him not to be anxious. And so John baptizes Jesus and two things happen:

First of all the Spirit of God appears to descend on Jesus like a dove and then a voice, understood to be the voice of God, said,

'You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.'

This is the moment when 30 years or so after he left his Father's throne the almighty God says 'You are my Son' – you are worth everything to me and I'm so proud of you.'

The Father was not telling Jesus something he didn't already know, but his words are spoken to affirm Jesus in front of others. That's an extraordinary gift we can give in relationship – I would urge you don't miss the opportunities this year to affirm someone you love or care for, it may be a friend, a child or parent or spouse or someone who is important to you. They could be transformational.

But these words of God the Father are not just a personal encouragement to Jesus - they were a gift to those who heard it and a gift to us. Revealing not only his unique identity and worth but ours too. Let me try to explain.

Millions of TV viewers love watching programmes like *Antiques Roadshow* because it's fun to guess how much old and odd items are worth. Most of the time the owners think something they own is more valuable than it really is. But every now and then there's an unexpected surprise.

Like a few years ago when a Catholic priest called Father Jamie MacLeod was told by Fiona Brue that the painting he picked up in a shop for £400 was in fact a Van Dyke masterpiece worth 400 thousand pounds! And the lovely thing about this story is that the priest decided that the proceeds of the sale would go towards paying for a new set of church bells.

I rather hope the PCC also sent Father Jamie on an all expenses holiday in the Bahamas.

But the reality is that in financial terms something is only worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it! You may think your house or flat is worth more, but it's really only worth what a buyer is willing to pay for it.

Well the glorious message of the gospel is that God has never made a person he didn't love. And if you want to know how valuable your life is to God, just look at the cross. With his arms outstretched, nailed to the cross, Jesus was saying, "This is how valuable you are to me. You are priceless."

Jesus was worth everything to the Father, yet he gave his dearly loved Son, because we are also infinitely valuable to him no matter what our life amounts too. This moment of Epiphany is bright and brilliant in the story of salvation. This is when God announces what we are worth. And the lengths he would go to in order to set us free from the burden of sin and the fear of death, bringing us into relationship with him.

Even those of us with years of faith and good Christian service behind us can struggle to believe this...perhaps because we are only too aware of our shortcomings.

[And it's precisely why Isaiah speaks so tenderly to the people of Israel in their exile... *'Do not be afraid...for I have...redeemed you, called you by name, you are mine, I am with you.'*]

What does all this have to do with the mission of this church at the beginning of a new year and on the cusp of a new season of mission? Why does St Mary's exist?

It is to give glory to God in the centre of this city, creating a place where people can discover their true value to God: homeless, business people, those serving in civic life, in arts and creative industries, students, school children, tourists, late-night revellers, early-morning survivors of late-night revelling, friends, strangers, enemies, the broken and hurting, the seriously successful.

The purpose and plan behind establishing St Mary's once again as a parish with a single centre of worship and witness is that you and your Vicar might give your best energies to playing a full part in the mission of God in the heart of this city. The Standing Committee met yesterday to begin to define the priorities within your planning; this will include:

New worshipping services that are wildly creative, innovative and enterprising for a city that is seeking to be the same, yet maintaining the same standards of excellence as the present musical tradition, starting with a family friendly service to reach more children and young families.

To become a centre of prayer for the nations, with a rhythm of prayer all through the week, whether people are dropping in for a moment of quiet reflection or drawn to a large service or special celebration.

It is my hope that a prayer community of younger people might be established at St Mary's, drawing on the experience of the St Anselm Community formed at Lambeth Palace by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This might have a strong emphasis on serving in the city, especially caring for the poor, most vulnerable and excluded, as well as reaching out to local businesses and civic leaders.

To increase the opportunities for Christian education, as a place where people can explore the faith without fear of judgment or ridicule, and in strengthening family life and relationships to become the wedding capital of the East Midlands.

To extend your gift of Hospitality and Friendship – with a clearer sense of your place in the story of the wider diocese as the principal Anglican church in the city.

Above all, I pray, that you will tell the story of Jesus – through music, the arts, and through skilled communicators of the faith – to thousands who have never heard it or seen its relevance to life today.

What will it take to make this a fruitful journey ahead?

Five simple things, I suggest:

Learn to value each other as God values you, with all your differences and even the occasional disagreement.

Be creative and courageous in your planning, and soak it in prayer.

Be purposeful in your action; it's not without reason that 'fear not' is the most frequent command in the bible. Don't prevaricate too long. Wayne Downing, a four-star General who commanded Special Forces and founded Common Purpose said, 'I always want more information but waiting can also mean disaster. A 75% plan well executed now is always better than a 99% plan executed an hour too late.'

Be prepared to make mistakes and learn from them, and forgive one another and move on.

And fifthly, *give all the glory to God.*

I'm not going to tell you that you are to be a pro-cathedral because that would be unhelpful to you...your value is not the result of any special status I or others might credit to St Mary the Virgin in the Lace Market – but the consequence of what you are becoming by the grace and truth of Christ Jesus our Lord: A church where all manner of people will wonder, worship, witness and work for the transformation of society to the glory of God. A 21st Epiphany of Christ's healing presence through his church in a broken and divided and yet still beautiful world. Amen.