

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Isaiah 49:14-15 / Matthew 6:24-34)  
*Self-worth*

What is our own worth?

If you google this question, in 66 seconds, you will get two hundred and twenty five million answers. It shows that we are not the only ones to ask the question!

This piece of information may seem a bit remote from Jesus' statement: "You cannot be the slave both of God and of money". Yet later on in our Gospel reading Jesus poses the question: "Are you not worth much more than the birds in the sky are?"

To deal with the question of our own worth is important. We must see ourselves as valuable rather than worthless, and our lives as meaningful rather than pointless. The way we evaluate ourselves and our lives colours how we interpret our achievements and our failures, and how we interact with others.

To know our own worth is to respect ourselves for who we truly are. It means being convinced of our own dignity and value, of our uniqueness as persons.

This sense of self-worth is the central source of joy of our lives. No achievement in the world can bring us happiness if we do not feel happy about ourselves. Even having a tremendous job, a lot of money, great physical beauty, a huge amount of respect from those around us will fail to touch us if we look down upon ourselves, if we despise ourselves.

Here we are touching on one of the great tensions in our lives: we need to matter to other people, to be relevant to them, to be valued and needed by them. Yet vital as they are, human relationships are transient and fragile. Friendships, families, marriages come and go, as we change, lose contact, have misunderstandings and die. We yearn to matter to someone who is constant and faithful.

Here we come back to our Gospel reading. Because when Jesus says: "You cannot be the slave both of God and of money" he is precisely asking us: where do you get your own worth from?

When we are obsessed with material things, when we are what we do, when our first priority is to buy and consume, then we become as small as all the material things we can acquire and our worth shrinks.

Jesus uses a very eloquent image, when he speaks about our obsession with material things, he says: "It is the pagans who set their hearts on all these things". When our hearts are set on small things, on petty worldly realities, then they wither and so does our self-worth.

It is a strange thing and yet it is true: we become what we worship. If we have made an idol of money, of material wealth, of reputation, then our heart identifies with these things and dies, it becomes hardened and suffocates.

Obviously Jesus' words are not aiming at people who do not have enough to eat or to drink, or who cannot buy clothes. His goal is to challenge us who have enough and yet who long for more and more and who may become enslaved to anything and everything which can give us the impression that we are valuable and relevant.

We are worth more than thousands of sparrows, not because of anything we may have done or said. Our worth is a gracious gift of God, it is God's imprint upon us. When we set our hearts on God, then we tap into the source of our true self. From here, we gain a proper sense of who we are and we learn to look at ourselves as God looks at us: with love, patience and hope.

What is at stake here is our freedom. It is not insignificant that Jesus speaks of slavery: “No one can be the slave of two masters (...). You cannot be the slave both of God and of money”. In speaking like this, Jesus places us in front of the dilemma: do we want to be free to be ourselves or do we want to be enslaved and prevented from being who we truly are?

In one of his sermons, St Bernard states clearly that he does not want to depend on others in order to feel good about himself: “I should be a fool to lock up my glory in the coffer of men’s lips so that I should have to beg it of them whenever I wanted it” (*Serm. On Canticle*, 13:6). Our glory – our worth – does not come from outside, cannot flow from earthly realities. Not only will they pass away but they cannot quench our thirst and satisfy our longing.

Shakespeare wrote: “This above all – to thine own self be true” (*Hamlet*, I:3). We are true to our own self when we do not devalue it by making it the slave of material things. Jesus’ message today is to remind us that we are worth much more than the birds in the sky are, and the only way to be true to ourselves is to connect with God in our hearts. Herein is our real value.

In a world where many are insecure about their own value, their real self, let us bear witness to the liberating presence of God in our hearts. Let us show to all that God has made us precious and of great value in his own eyes and that we do not need to waste our time and energy in serving money and all that it stands for.