16th Sunday after Trinity, Bilbrough and Rufforth.

So what have you immediately taken away from this Gospel reading? It is a very stern story and one which could be very disheartening for some. The parable of the master and the slave reflects a society in which slavery is an institution that no one questions, and more especially the slave doesn’t question. What do you do in your life without question. More importantly, perhaps, whose requests do you follow without question.

The parable brings us to the knowledge that God does not award prizes for doing things, and even if we have done our best we actually are only doing our duty. In essence we are the slave and God is the master, perhaps not a thought you’ve had before, or perhaps feel comfortable with.

One of the things that really upset me when I got my cancer diagnosis was that I had to give up giving blood. I never did it for the medals you would receive after donating so many times, it was only ever done because it was the right thing to do, although the club biscuit afterwards was always a special thank you, and why they never had the purple currant ones will always haunt me. What they did start to do, which was lovely, was to send a text to say where your blood had gone. But I, like the vast majority of folk, didn’t give blood for any praise, and in reality not even for a biscuit or knowledge to where the blood had gone; I gave because I think it is an important and the right thing to do.

Having said this, though, we can all recognise the need for recognition for the work we do, and at some level it is a need that we all have even if we try and say that it isn’t important. Most people yearn for some level of recognition, acknowledgement and appreciation. However, it can become an issue for yourself and for others when the need of a reward, in whatever form, is the primary force behind doing the actual action.

The slave who was introduced in the Gospel was expected to be a very versatile chap, quick to adapt and switch roles, firstly ploughing on the farm before then attending to the sheep. And then after a long days work he returns to his masters’ house, doubtless tired and in need of a rest, but he cleans himself up and he reappears as the butler and cook. Did the Master in the parable thank the slave, no he didn’t, and why should he. The slave after all was only doing his duty.

It is often felt, and said, that ours is an entitlement culture, where the focus of the people is on rights, rewards and recognition. Service, freely given and for its own sake, without any thought of reward is belittled and questioned. Of course we would also hope that the master, to whom the service and work is due, would show pleasure and thanks, but he is not obliged to do so nor should it be expected of him. When a footballer scores a goal why is there such adulation, expected and given, it is his or her job and they will be paid handsomely for doing it: a mechanic who puts the wheels on a car doesn’t expect adulation when the wheels he has just put on don’t fall off as the car is driven away, he doesn’t do a lap of honour around the workshop, wanting the adulation and the attention.

The verses that precede our Gospel reading are addressed to the apostles and so it’s been suggested that the parable is meant to focus their minds on the Christian community and its leadership that is forming around them. Had the entitlement culture permeated through to those first apostles? Were they beginning to think that they should be thanked and praised for all that they were doing? Were they losing their faith in God?

The prophet Habakkuk was also beginning to lose his faith in God, a God who was letting destruction and violence take place and was not answering his cries for help. But his cries for help and guidance are answered, and Habakkuk is told that there will be an end to the violence and warned, or reminded, that the righteous will live by their faith. If Habakkuk continues to live his life with God at the fore, then all will be well, but those who perhaps think about their own needs and rewards first will have problems along the way.

Does the church feel that way today, do our church communities truly believe that God is in all that is happening, and lay our complete trust in him, and if so then all that we do is done for God as thanks for his gifts and grace to us. If our works are done for God surely then it is for God to respond, it is up to God to metaphorically give you a slap on the back and a high five for doing such a great job, and as with Habakkuk this can take a while to arrive or interpret.

It is only when our hearts are set fully on serving God that we are weaned off our entitlement culture, because we cannot make claims on God or build up a credit with him. When we have done everything, just as was the case with Jesus we are still undeserving servants, doing what we feel is right. But we are always very happy and contended undeserving servants.

Yes of course we can affirm, thank and bless others for who they are as well as what they do, but we shouldn’t be deceiving them or ourselves that we can win God’s thanks and praise by our human actions. What we do in God’s name we do for God, even though others may benefit, and that knowledge should be praise enough.