

REFLECTION SEPTEMBER 20 2020 (YR A) – WHOLE CIRCUIT

I think the relationship between the old testament reading and the Gospel is that of the generous inclusive nature of God's love and of the Kingdom of God, that at times leaves us marvelling and at other times confused and dazed when we lose sight of the fact that God's nature is love not hate and destruction.

The strangest thing about Jonah is not all that fanciful stuff about being swallowed by a large fish, but rather that he is annoyed about very nature of God. He is actually upset because it turns out after all that God is indeed gracious and merciful and slow to anger. He feels that because God has not destroyed Nineveh as he said he would that he, Jonah, has been made to look a fool. He cannot rejoice and delight in the fact that the whole people (some one hundred and twenty thousand) have turned to God and have been saved. It is not as though God's generous spirit has deprived Jonah of God's love, grace and mercy.

No, what Jonah wanted to see was destruction on a grand scale, he's more concerned about the life of a bush than his fellow human beings! It strikes me that what Jonah really wants is an Old Testament God rather than the God of the Old Testament – that is God portrayed as the despotic bully "hell" bent on destruction and terror, with a vengeful judgement that leaves no room for grace and mercy.

And I have to say that unfortunately that is exactly the picture of God presented by some who claim to follow Christ, never happier then when they can condemn others, happy to go along with "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites", whilst completely failing to see that they represent the modern equivalent of those Jesus would call whited sepulchres.

Now of course the cynic might conclude that a people and leadership prepared to believe that God is capable of their destruction would do anything to save their own skins and exploit God's generosity, so of course they are going to repent! Well Jonah may be thinking in part, that that is exactly what happened.

And if we think entirely in human terms, we can see the naïve and unworldly, who seek to be generous, being exploited by the unscrupulous, and that they need protecting from themselves and from those who would exploit them. It certainly what friends of mine have had to do for their sister as her mental capacities have diminished. But, of course, God does not need such protection.

Jonah, disappointed as he may be not to see the promised destruction of Nineveh, is nonetheless reminded of what he already knew deep down, God is generous and merciful and slow to anger.

Now Jesus tells a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven, and as always, it's the punchline not the details of the story that are important. As usual Jesus draws on the everyday experience of his hearers to get his point across. They would be familiar with the sight of casual workers gathering in the market square looking for work, hoping to be hired and the increasing desperation of those not hired as the day wears on. The punchline is that it doesn't matter when you become involved in the Kingdom of God, the rewards are the same for all – to know the love, grace and mercy of God, to know oneself as a child of God.

I wonder, if when Matthew included this story he was thinking of the views of members of his own community, mainly Jewish Christians wary of gentile converts. Did they have a sense of their own entitlement? That somehow, they mattered more, were more precious in God's sight? The obvious decision makers and leaders?

Perhaps this warning about the first shall be last and the last shall be first, is about our equality before God, the lack of a pecking order. It doesn't matter how long you have been a member of the Church, after all our place in God's kingdom is not reliant on our own efforts or merits but our yes to God's grace, that outpouring of love for us we see in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

So, in part, this story invites us to welcome those who come with open hearts and minds to join with us in the work of the Kingdom.

Now, hang on there you cry, you've just added a qualification – open hearts and minds, why?

Well any working together requires trust and respect from all parties, a sense of mutuality and this is not always evident. I remember a friend, Betty, telling me that a couple were returning to her Church after 14 years worshipping somewhere else (but still in the area). They were coming with the stated aim of saving them! From what was unclear, but it seemed that they didn't think Betty's Church believed in the Bible, well not in the right way. Betty was ready to challenge them if necessary, with questions as whether they wore clothes of mixed fibres or ate prawn cocktails etc. Holy mischief to make a point about being consistent, and as inclusive as God.

I did say that the details of the parable are not what matters, and certainly Jesus was not putting forward an economic system – same wage irrespective of the work done, and only a fairly modest wage at that. But sometimes these stories do allow us to reflect on our times and experiences.

As I read the story, I can see instantly the relationship even to British industrial society of the 1920's and 30's. My great Uncle Frank would line up with other men outside the pit hoping for work. He had a good reputation, was and looked strong so normally got

chosen. Frank would always try and get his brother Billy work as well, and often succeed in persuading the hirer that they came as a package. Others would go home with no work that day, or the next, or the one after that.

A far cry from 21st century Britain. But is it? Aren't the people on zero hours contracts expected to be available when needed and with no income when they are not, just like those who queued outside the pit or hung around in ever increasing desperation in the market square.

During this pandemic, much has been done through the Job Protection Scheme and other measures to safeguard jobs and livelihoods, especially with no blueprint to follow, working quickly and hoping for the best.

But, unemployment is rising, poverty is increasing and reliance on foodbanks is increasing, all compounded by the detrimental effects of continuing social isolation. Added to which is what is rapidly turning into the omnishambles of the Government's response and laws we struggle to understand but are expected to keep fully, and we can't get away with the argument that we might only break these laws in limited and specific ways (a defence seemingly available to the Government and its approach to international law).

In the context of our two readings about the generosity and mercy of the God of love, I wonder where are the signs of the Kingdom at the moment?

In the love and generosity of those looking after the most vulnerable members of society as part of their jobs or as volunteers? Yes

In a rediscovered sense of society and community that we have seen during the pandemic? Yes.

In measures to mitigate the risks of people catching COVID 19 and our support for those measures? Yes.

And so, we could go on. But it needs also to be at the level of challenging the way in which we organise and run our society, in the ways in which we include the marginalized and vulnerable and allow them to take part fully in society, including economically. In the ways in which we challenge racism and discrimination, so all are welcome, irrespective of their colour, gender, sexuality, orientation, physical and mental abilities etc etc. A truly inclusive society that reflects the values of the Kingdom and shares God's grace and love.

Unlike Jonah, we cannot sit under our bushes and wait to see what will happen. God calls us to be active in the World, and as Christ's disciples part of the solution, so that in the power of the Spirit we are channels of hope and of love.

Amen.