



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 20, 2020
The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Jonah 3:10–4:11 and Matthew 20:1-16
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“That’s not fair!”

When my children were young, I was often called on to arbitrate in a dispute between them. It was usually over something minor, and often began with increasingly louder exclamations of “That’s mine!” After weighing up the evidence set before me, I would try and find some compromise solution (unless of course it really was his or hers in the first place) to which I would then invariably hear the wail “*That’s not fair!*”

Well, that could easily be the translation of Jonah’s response to God deciding to relent from destroying the great city of Nineveh!

The story of Jonah is a hard-hitting one which speaks as simple and powerful message today as it did two and a half thousand years ago. Less a prophetic book (after all there is only one prophecy contained in it, namely, the proclamation of Jonah to the King of Nineveh warning him of impending destruction if there is not repentance) and more a parable because of its story-like qualities - its wonderful exaggerations, and its simple construction into four parts:

- Jonah's attempt to run away from God
- A Psalm of thanksgiving from within the belly of the fish
- The Conversion of Nineveh and
- Jonah's anger at Nineveh's repentance.

Written after the Babylonian exile, the book of Jonah grapples with a changed world-view because of the exile. In re-building their home-land, which included the physical re-building of Jerusalem and the Temple, the Jewish community began to re-think their history and their role as God’s chosen people. Some still preached exclusivism - looking for Jerusalem to be the center of the world. Others began to interpret the signs of the times in different ways; could Israel's God also be the God of other Nations? Can God be worshipped on alien shores as the Jewish Community had done in Babylon? If so, was God's compassion and forgiveness accessible to other nations - open to Jew *and* Gentile alike? This struggle over exclusivism and universalism, is the backdrop to the story of Jonah.

The author uses Jonah, the name of a prophet who actually existed and is referred to in 2 Kings during the reign of King Jeroboam II in the Northern Kingdom. But the Jonah we read today is more of a parody of the prophet. The story is full of satire, and many people have spent time finding meaning in some of the

literary devices used in the books – including the three days that Jonah spent in the belly of the fish. But the fish, like many great fish before in the stories of antiquity, may simply be there to add a little drama, and, in the author of Jonah's case, is a neat way of getting the central character of the story back to dry land.

The significance of Jonah, however, is found in the discussions between God and Jonah concerning redemption and forgiveness, and the challenge to Jonah that forgiveness and compassion will be given to the gentiles also.

“When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.”

That's the same as saying, “That's not fair!”

There is a wonderful irony in the passage that we heard today. Jonah says that he *knew* that God would be merciful, which was the very reason why he had not wanted to go to Nineveh in the first place! The example of the bush that gave Jonah shade and then is destroyed by a worm, brings Jonah to his senses as he realized how narrow his understanding has been, and how mean-spirited his faith had become.

‘God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”’

With this in our minds, we turn to the Gospel story today that, again, contrasts the generosity of God with the mean-spiritedness of those who should know better. It is important to understand the context of today's parable of the laborers in the vineyard. At the end of Chapter 19, Jesus gives his disciples some challenging teaching on wealth after meeting a young man who wanted to follow Jesus but lacked one thing. Jesus asked him to give away his possessions and we are told that the young man went away with a heavy heart because he was very wealthy. Jesus then suggested to the disciples that it would be hard for the rich and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The disciples are perplexed and Peter cries out, almost in desperation, *“Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”* To which Jesus gives a promise: *“Truly I tell you...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.”* But he then adds a warning – the same warning that ended today's parable: *“many who are first will be last, and the last will be first,”* thus framing the parable that we heard today.

This is a **Parable of the Kingdom** but to understand it, we must rid ourselves of human concepts of kingdom – this is not the exercise of power in human society, even though Jesus is using words like Kingdom, landowner, and laborers. In God's kingdom, things are not as we might expect otherwise, like the laborers in the parable, or those listening to it, we might find ourselves saying, “That's not fair!” This is not a parable about economic policy or the minimum wage. It is a masterful story in that it evokes such a welling up of emotion – that we find ourselves wondering why we sympathize with those laborers who had worked all day and received the same wage as those hired at the eleventh hour. Perhaps we assume that those who had no work really were idle or, perhaps, not very skillful. Maybe they were lazy! But, of course, they might be unemployed for all kinds of other reasons, including the fact that there is not enough work around, or that they were from the wrong class, or they were disabled, or of a different race, or the wrong gender.

All the laborers were paid a full-day's wage. Those who had worked all day, indeed, expected more so they grumble. But they are not grumbling about the others being paid the same of them, rather, they are grumbling about the statement that the landowner is making by being generous: *“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”*

Listen again – it’s so subtle, and hidden in the middle of the debate over wages, that it is easy to miss. Yet, it is at the heart of this parable of the Kingdom – **“you have made them equal to us.”**

This parable of the kingdom is another sign of the Beloved Community, living by the beatitudes of the kingdom, in which Jesus turns everything upside down. The landowner was generous, yes – the landowner did not have to pay those who worked the least the same as those who worked all day **but he did!** And that generosity was not simply in the wages he paid them, but in the fact that he went out of his way to invite them in – to give them meaningful work, regardless of the reasons for why they had not been employed at the beginning of the day, or even the end of the working day – and to treat them all as equal. Jesus uses this parable to hammer home to Peter and the disciples what he had been trying to teach them – that the first will be last if we simply cling to a human way of being a society – with rules, and consequences, and power struggles, and rights, and class divisions, and misogyny, and racism, and prejudice, and finding fault, and retribution instead of the search for justice. Instead, Jesus suggests, the kingdom of God is marked out by generosity of spirit; care for those who have nothing; reaching out to others; and room for all to share in the abundance of God’s love and forgiveness. It is a sign of how things are to be – and, yes, some of us are going to find it hard to accept – even those of us within the Church community.

Some words of Saint Oscar Romero:

“Let us build the Church according to the heart of Jesus - a Church in which every member, from the bishop to the youngest child who was baptized today incorporate themselves into the Kingdom of God. Let us empower ourselves so that we can establish the Kingdom of God through our word, our community life, and our example. Let us not forget that we are servants of the Kingdom of God. Jesus has told us how we can enter the Kingdom of God: living these three conditions --- observing the commandments, clothing ourselves with a spirit of poverty and detachment and, above all, following Jesus who is the eternal wisdom of God, who became flesh and made his dwelling among us ”¹.

¹. Sermon preached on Sunday, October 14, 1979 (From ‘The Romero Trust’)