

Sunday, September 20th. 202 Trinity 15

Jonah 3,10-4,11, Psalm 145, 1-8, Matthew 20, 1-16

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In recent weeks, we have heard a number of times on the news about U-turns, when members of the government have changed their minds about how to deal with the coronavirus crisis. As the situation changes, it has been felt that new decisions had to be made.

Today's first reading from Jonah contains a U-turn, this time on the part of God. In the first chapter, Jonah is sent by God to Nineveh to cry out against its wickedness. But Jonah doesn't do as he is told, but gets on a ship bound for Tarshish to escape from God. Unfortunately, there is an almighty storm, and Jonah, believing that it is his fault, suggests that he be thrown overboard, so that the storm will abate. He is swallowed up by a big fish and is eventually spat out onto dry land. Back to square one! He is told again to go to Nineveh, and this time, when he makes his proclamation, the people and their king repent.

No prophet ever experienced such a success as Jonah, but he is furious! He knew that God was soft, and that, if the Ninevites repented, he would forgive. That is why he tried to flee to Tarshish in the first place, in order to forestall the eventuality of the Ninevites' conversion. So, Jonah is rejecting the God of the covenant, who is consistently described in loving terms, as in Psalm 145:

'They shall pour forth the story of your abundant kindness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
long-suffering and of great goodness.'

So, Jonah, who is asked, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' asks to die. But God won't let him go without teaching him a lesson. However, Jonah still doesn't give up hope that, somehow, the doom pronounced against Nineveh will be fulfilled. He gets very cross about the plant, which shades him and then suddenly dies, and the hot wind, which torments him.

The point of the story comes at the end. If Jonah pitied the plant, with which he had nothing to do, should not God pity the Ninevites, who don't know their right hand from their left, that is, are religiously ignorant? Israel should not presume to limit God's concern to the people, with whom he has covenanted. His mercy spills out to embrace the Gentiles, as seen in Exodus:

'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, The Lord; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.'

The Gospel seems at first sight to go against our sense of fairness. The landowner does not have a crew of regular workers, but is dependent instead on the occasional help of people from the village. In the end they are all paid the same amount, however long they have worked, and those, who have worked the longest, understandably grumble.

But the main points of the story are contained in the two questions, 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?' and, 'Or are you envious because I am generous?'

The landowner operates by a standard of grace, not of merit. The central character is the generous landowner, the parable being a defence of Jesus' message of God's grace for all, as opposed to those, who believe in a religion of merit.

The last verse, 'The first will be last and the last first' may be interpreted as though it were a contrast between the Jews, who came to God's vineyard first, and the Gentiles, who came last.

In school, we talk about "late developers". There are some pupils, who work well all the time and others, who come along later and suddenly "see the light". I have sometimes spoken of a boy in my class, who didn't work very well, had a tendency to sit on the back row and chat. I said one day, "You are a proper gasbag!" You would have thought that I had paid him the highest compliment! He grinned from ear to ear, and, as I called him the chief gasbag, he went on to score an A in his exam! He came up from behind, and got the same result as many of the others.

In church we may think that we have been faithful all our lives and that we deserve some reward. Then at the last minute come people, who haven't done much or seem to have wasted their time, and they receive an equal blessing. "Not fair," we say.

But we have to realise that we will all receive an equal blessing, and that God will make something of all our lives. Entry into his kingdom is by invitation, and we can either accept or reject it. The workers in the parable were hired at the invitation of the landowner.

When Jesus was on the cross, the criminal, crucified with him, suddenly saw the light: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.' He received an equal blessing with everyone else.

So, we can be filled with thanksgiving that, in spite of our mistakes, weaknesses and turning away from God, we are chosen and receive that equal blessing. Psalm 145 makes it all clear:
'I will exalt you, O God my King, and bless your name for ever and ever.
Every day will I bless you and praise your name for ever and ever.
Great is the Lord and highly to be praised;
his greatness is beyond all searching out.'

This is the God of complete justice, inviting us, whoever we are, into his kingdom. Can we see and accept that invitation?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.