

You are a gracious God

A sermon prepared by Revd Bridges for the 15th Sunday of Trinity 20 September 2020

Refs: Jonah 3.10-end of 4; Philippians 1.21-end; Matthew 20.1-16

Three weeks ago I preached about Jeremiah – who was cross because of what God was putting him through. This week it's Jonah who is cross, this time because of the way God has forgiven the Ninevites.

Jonah thought the people of Nineveh were so evil that they didn't deserve any mercy from God, so when God asked him to go and try to persuade them to repent of all their evil-doing, he refused. He tried to run off in the opposite direction, and we all know what a fine mess that got him into. In the end he had to give in, he went and preached, and lo and behold – the Ninevites took notice of him, said they were sorry, and God changed his mind about bringing down calamity. And Jonah was furious!! He was so angry he thought it would be better for him to die!! So God taught him a lesson.

God gave Jonah a bush for shade, and then took it away again. Once again Jonah asked to die – this time because he was so hot and weak. And so God challenged him: if you can be concerned, CARE about that bush that you had no part in creating, why should I not care about the people of Nineveh, who were obviously rather naïve and didn't actually know what they were doing!

I suspect you find it as extraordinary as I do that Jonah had those wonderful words in his heart 'You are a gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' and was cross about it!! And our Gospel reading picks up this theme.

The labourers who had worked in the vineyard all day were cross because the landowner chose to pay those who had only worked for one hour exactly the same wage. The landowner wasn't being unfair – he gave those who had worked all day exactly what he had promised them. If they hadn't known he had given everyone the same wage they would have gone away quite contented. But the landowner chose to pay those who had worked the least time, first so that all the rest saw and would have expected more. But then the parable wouldn't have had any meaning if the hardest workers had just gone off and not known what the others received.

So we have another example of people being cross because of God's generosity. But of course, people aren't always cross at this! We are all sinners, so we are all grateful that God abounds in steadfast love, is slow to anger and ready to forgive us whenever we say we're sorry. When God's generosity is directed at ourselves, or at the people we love, or the people we share the same ideas with, then it's ok.

It's when he extends it to people we don't like, or who WE believe don't deserve it. that we find it hard. But we are told time and time again (and it was the theme of my last sermon) that this sort of 'judgement' is not ours – it is God's alone. And we are told time and time again, that God loves each and every one of us unconditionally – whoever we are – and is ready to forgive anyone when they are sorry for any wrong they have done.

But where does our Epistle fit in to all this? Most of you know that I am a huge fan of St Paul. I know that many people are not, but I am often overwhelmed by what he writes about LOVE. His letters are full of eloquent outpourings of his understanding of God's unconditional LOVE for each of us, of his understanding of how the Holy Spirit (of love) works in us so that we can be full of Christ, and live in him. He often used the experiences he has had in life to illustrate what he was trying to teach, and today we are given an insight into how difficult he found things at times.

Like Jeremiah and like Jonah life had been tough for him, but he was not cross, he was not angry with God. He accepted his suffering as part of sharing in Christ's suffering. This didn't stop

him from sometimes feeling, like Jeremiah, and Jonah, Elijah and many of the prophets, that he would rather die in order to be relieved from his suffering and to be with Christ. But he understood that God had other things for him to do and, unlike Jeremiah, Jonah and the others, he accepted this. He understood that he still had work to do, to teach, encourage and support all those who were trying to live a life according to Christ's values.

So through his letters, Paul assures us that, when we find life difficult, we must go on trusting in God and not get cross with him. Even if at times we feel in the depths of despair because of what is going on around us, we must look to God, to Jesus Christ, to find strength and courage to go on. We must not be intimidated by people who oppose and upset us, if we are standing firm in one spirit. We must trust and look to God to strengthen us with his Holy Spirit, so that, not only do we have strength to keep ourselves going, but we also have strength to encourage the people around us. To remind them of the unconditional love that God has for each and every one of us, to remind them of his generosity, his graciousness, his mercy, his forgiveness, and his steadfast love.

Amen