**Sunday 20 September 2020**
Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

I love Jonah! And only partly because of
the unfortunate incident with the whale.
In some ways it is a shame that
the dramatic part of Jonah’s story has
overshadowed the rest of it.
For it takes a bit of a memory stretch to recall
that when Jonah finally did arrive
to pronounce judgement on Nin’eveh
the people of that city did the least likely thing.

They **actually listened** to the message of God’s judgment that Jonah had to deliver, and repented.
Having had their backs to God for so long,
Jonah’s prophetic words were the very thing
that caused them to turn and **face towards God**.

Which is the point at which this morning’s passage
joins the narrative.

In response to Nin’eveh’s repentance, God changes the plan.
And because he doesn’t know what else to do,
Jonah has this glorious hissy fit
which concludes his short appearance in the Scriptures.

Poor old Jonah! He had gone to extremes
in order to avoid being the messenger of doom.
Dragging his soggy, sorry self to deliver the bad news
of impending judgement had come at
considerable personal cost.
And so, after **all he’d been through**,
he was quite looking forward to saying “I told you so”,
at just before the neighbourhood went up in smoke.

And so Jonah was **heartily disappointed** that God
was no longer going to dish out hell, fire and brimstone
as previously advertised.

Is it any surprise that Jonah was left feeling
foolish and angry? So angry in fact
that he spat the dummy at God:
telling God that frankly, all things considered,
he might as well be dead. It is a **spectacular tantrum.**

‘Why then, did you put me to all that trouble?’ he says.
‘I knew you were merciful, and that’s why I fled from you
in the first place.’ (Talk about a backhanded compliment.) ‘And now you might as well **end** my life,
because I’m so angry, that it is better to die than to live.’

It’s an **extreme** reaction. **Ridiculous** actually.
But in fact, this is the point at which I really begin to
like Jonah. I, too, rail against injustice when the baddies don’t get their just desserts.
And if I’m honest, there are times when I think
that *I’d* make a *better judge* of other people than *God* does.

And maybe this is our human condition.
We live alongside our families and workmates,
we critique those who hold different religious or political points of view, those who make different choices
or have limited choice, and we are constantly
making judgements about their worthiness or unworthiness in relation to our own.
Self-righteousness is a powerful position to hold.

And when we find ourselves occupying
the moral high ground, then we are incapable of comprehending another point of view.
We are incapable of seeing others through the light
of God’s love and forgiveness.

And before we know it, we find ourselves in Jonah’s soggy, sandy shoes, unable to celebrate with God
at the inclusion of **all** in God’s love.

So we do well to note that his story began with
*God judging Nineveh*, but it ended with *Jonah judging God*. We also do well to notice that in the entire story of Jonah, the only person moving away from God
is the prophet himself. Everyone else is moving Godward.

Notice also that the story doesn’t spend a lot of time dwelling on the gratitude of the people of Nineveh.
Instead, it focuses on Jonah’s outrage
in response to God’s generosity.
Jonah had become attached to this idea of vengeance
and he now has a sense of entitlement about it.

Perhaps the story of Jonah is not so much about **sin and repentance** as it is about
**gratitude versus entitlement**.

This dynamic is very much present in the parable of
the workers in the vineyard.
We hear nothing of the surprise and gratitude
that the late arrivals must have expressed
when they were given a full day’s wage for an hour’s work.

Instead, Jesus focuses our attention on the
sense of entitlement that the first arrivals had,
when they believed that the normal daily rate
to which **they had agreed**, had somehow now
**diminished in value**, because other, less worthy workers received exactly the same.

The first arrivals start by feeling lucky to have a day’s work, and out of a sense of entitlement,
they end up judging the landowner.
The landowner’s open handed generosity
is met by tight-fisted resentment.

As much as we try to understand it, the truth is,
the parable of the workers in the vineyard isn’t **fair**.
It makes neither economic nor mathematical sense.
Which is the whole point.

Both of these stories seem to indicate that **God’s good grace** comes in a one-size-fits-all. And that size is Extra Large. God’s generosity is sufficient and full for all creation.
It is not dependent on the size of our response to God.

But the very concept of grace cannot be grasped
when our mentality is so shaped by a sense of entitlement. Grace and entitlement don’t even belong
in the same sentence. Grace is God’s to give,
not ours to either apportion or distribute.

Generosity is supposed to engender generosity,
not tight-fistedness, and yet this latter
is the response we see in both of these readings.
It is a dynamic that Jesus presented in the parables
of the prodigal, the lost sheep and in all those stories
which end with the last being first and the first being last.

We can only assume that God’s generosity
and human response to it, was of vital significance to Jesus, which suggests it ought also be of vital significance to us.

The grace of God may be a phrase that
slips easily off our tongues,
but it is a concept that takes a life time to wrestle with,
for it is utterly counter to everything we’ve ever been taught about fairness, about simple maths,
about behaviour and reward.
It flies in the face of our competitive, judgmental society.

And so when we think of the **judgement of God**
we expect that God will work to our maths.
But in these stories, Jonah and the early
workers in the vineyard got up close and personal
with God’s judgement.
And in discovering that mercy and grace far outweighed it, they ended up judging the giver.

It’s a sobering thought.
It’s a thought that might lead us to revisit our
theology of judgement.W

Frederick Beuchner once said that stories like these illustrate the **‘unflagging lunacy of God.’**What a glorious phrase.

It is so startling that it stops us short,
and invites us to step outside our natural way of being
and consider another point of view.
For it is this **unflagging lunacy** that God invites **us** into.
To put away our calculators, and join the party.

God invites us to delight in God’s grace –
especially when it is lovingly bestowed on others.
God invites us to unclench our fists,
and celebrate the glorious unfairness
of God’s outrageous generosity.

Amen.