

StL 24.09.17 - The unfairness of God.

What a tantalizing start to a reading! “When God saw what they did...” Who? What did they do? “God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.” What calamity? Didn’t do what?

This is the trouble with so many of our lectionary readings – they will, so often, start right in the middle of something and give us no idea of the context and setting which would have helped us to understand so much better what the readings are trying to say. Mind you, on this occasion they would have had to include the whole Jonah story and most of us would find that far too long to have to pay attention!

It’s a great story. There’s Jonah, a man with a sense of vocation. He believes he is called on by God to speak God’s mind to all and sundry. Then one day he gets a sense of calling to do something he really doesn’t want to do. Something that won’t do his personal image and sense of importance much good at-all. He believes God is calling him, a Jewish prophet, one of God’s ‘Chosen People’, to go to a foreign, non-Jewish, Gentile city called Nineveh and tell them that God, the God they don’t acknowledge, has seen their general wickedness and is going to destroy them – unless they repent and turn to Him. Now Jonah is very good at proclaiming death and destruction and the doom of the Lord, and at a pinch he’ll even have a go at foreign Gentiles who don’t even know anything about the one true God anyway. But it’s that last bit that really gets him – “unless they repent and turn to him.” Here we go! He knows what God is like. As he says in the part of the story we just heard “I know that you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing.”

Well that’s good, isn’t it? Not if you’re a Jonah it isn’t. The last thing he wants is to look a right prat and have people sniggering at him and calling out things like “Well, so much for all your prophecies of doom and gloom then! It never happened, did it?”

He’s not having that. So, he gets on a boat and goes in exactly the opposite direction from Nineveh towards Spain and thinks ‘well that’s the end of that! You’re not going to make a right idiot of me and have me shown up in public like that.’

But it wasn’t the end of the story, of course. The boat runs into a terrible storm, the crew realise that they have a fugitive on board, Jonah admits he’s running away from his God and suggests they throw him over the side, which they do, the storm subsides, the boat travels on safely and that should be the end of the story.

But it isn’t. Jonah gets swallowed up by a huge sea creature, spends time reflecting on life, realises you can’t get away from God no matter where you are and gives in. He gets spewed out on dry land, and guess where he ends up? Yes, you’ve guessed it, Nineveh. So, he does what he was told to do, tells them what dreadful things are going to happen to them because of their wicked ways and, just as he had thought, they repent and nothing happens. And there he is, in the part of the story we heard, sitting on a hill in the heat of the sun, sulking. And what exactly is he sulking about? God’s unfairness.

It's there again in the Gospel reading we heard. Labourers work all day in a vineyard in the heat of the sun and at the end of the day, when they go to collect their wages, they find that people who'd only done an hour's work get paid exactly the same as them! It's so unfair! And to make matters even worse – or perhaps even better if you've really grasped what the Gospel is really all about – is that when Jesus tells that story he begins by saying that that is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like! It's so unfair!

Which is precisely what the Christian Gospel is saying – that salvation, membership of the Kingdom of Heaven, is, as we see things, unfair. We have an ingrained sense of fairness and justice that requires that reward and recompense should be earned, deserved, our 'just deserts'. Not so, according to the Christian Gospel, with God and his Kingdom. Amongst those hundred and twenty thousand or so of the people in Nineveh who were spared destruction, surely there must have been people who didn't deserve to be spared at-all. I'm sure the Jonah of the story would have been very good at his job, but it would be pushing the story even further beyond credibility if every single person who heard him repented and turned to God. Surely there were unrepentant thieves and murderers, rapists, child abusers, terrorists, gangs of men and women who exploit the vulnerable, just as there are in our towns and cities today? Surely, they will not be receiving the same reward in heaven as those of us who have borne the heat and burden of the day as it were in our years of faith and discipleship?

Well yes, if I have understood correctly the incredibly all-encompassing love of God whose 'unfairness' does not punish or reward according to what we or anyone else deserve; if, as the Christian Gospel is saying, it is god's Grace that ultimately comes into play rather than our sense of justice and fairness. That's incredible, unbelievable – and I believe it!

Some final thoughts, first from the Bible:-

**2 Peter 3 v.9** – God is not willing that any should be lost or perish

**1 Timothy 2 v. 4** – God will have everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

**John 13 v. 22** – I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

And finally, from an anonymous writer:-

***I dreamt death came the other night  
And Heaven's gate swung wide;  
With kindly grace an angel came and ushered me inside,  
And there, to my astonishment,  
Stood folk I'd known on earth;  
Some I had judged as quite unfit or of but little worth;  
Indignant words rose to my lips,  
But never were set free;  
For every face showed stunned surprise –  
No one expected me!***

