

September 20th, 2026 – Trinity XVI

Jonah 3:10- end of 4; Matthew 20:1-16

More of workers in the vineyard, and those very dodgy employment conditions, in a moment. First, our first reading, the book of Jonah.

If you know anything about the book of Jonah, you know about the whale. The great fish that swallowed up the grumpy prophet, swallowed him up and spewed him out. Jonah was, if you remember, running away from the mission he'd been given by God, he wanted nothing to do with it. And the fish was God's way of saying, you can run but you can't hide.

And why was Jonah grumpy? Because, he thought, God had given him the wrong mission. God had sent him to Nineveh, home of Israel's enemies, to those a decent Jew would want nothing to do with, a decent God would want nothing to do with. There's part of Jonah, a big part, saying I don't want the Kingdom if it involves those people.

And in our reading, the last chapter of the book of Jonah, the story reaches its climax. Jonah is, quite frankly, put in his place. God says to him, do you think I don't care about these people, these foreigners? Do you think I *shouldn't* care, about these people who I made, who I love? Do you think I don't rejoice when they come to me? Why are you *small*, Jonah? Why are you so mean-spirited? Oh, we are not like each other. I am unrestricted, boundless generosity and if you are meant to be my prophet, gosh do you have a lot to learn.

The Jonah story dates from about four hundred years before Jesus, and it's part of a big debate that is happening within Israel at that time. The Jews all agree on one thing – that they are indeed God's chosen people. But within that, there's a huge debate – *why* are we God's chosen people? What for? On one side, you've got people like Ezra and Nehemiah. They say, roughly, well because God loves us and he's not that fussed about anyone else. And our job, Israel's job, is just to keep ourselves special and holy and pure, well apart from all the wicked nations around us. And on the other, you've got the last few chapters of the Prophet Isaiah, or the book of Ruth, or the book of Jonah, all of

which are saying, no: the point of the chosen people is to help save the world. Israel is to be the light to the nations, the brilliant example of life under God, the magnet – such a beautiful people that the nations long to know its God.

Jesus, and the early Christians, stand on the Jonah-Ruth-Isaiah side of that argument. The nations are going to come in. Even the nations, even the peoples, whom Israel thought furthest from God, least deserving of God, even they are going to be welcomed into the Kingdom. Welcomed in, on equal terms with the Jewish people. They won't be second class citizens: they are just as much God's children as those who have served him from the start.

Do you hear the echoes of today's Gospel reading? The Jewish people have been hard at work in God's vineyard all day – indeed, for hundreds and hundreds of years. It has been hard labour, in the heat of struggle and persecution and exile, but they have endured. And now, others will be brought in. Who haven't endured. Who haven't suffered. And these others, God will treat just the same. Because in the Kingdom of God, it isn't about what you *deserve*. It isn't about what's *fair*. It's about a God who is wildly generous: unrestricted, boundless generosity.

It's not just a story about Jews and Gentiles either. Indeed, although that does seem a really obvious meaning, it's not the one Matthew's Gospel itself suggests. At the end of Chapter 19, just before our reading began, there's a question from St. Peter. He says to Jesus, look Lord, we – the twelve- have left everything and followed you. What's the reward going to be? What's in it for us?

And this story is Jesus' answer. There is a reward, there is grace and glory, you're going to live in the Kingdom of God But, lots of other people are going to as well. People who don't obviously deserve it. People who have not tried so hard, people who've been idle and unproductive and possibly very annoying. And why? Because, guess what, the Kingdom of God is not something you *deserve*. It's not a prize for hard work. You get it because I am boundless, wild generosity. And if you're still hung up on what's fair, on what you're owed, then you haven't really got it at all.

And after all, Peter, think about what you're asking. Do you *really* want things to be fair? Like, *really* fair? Do you want everyone to get exactly what they deserve? Would you still say that after you denied me three times in the Garden? What about you, St. Paul: do you want things to be fair? After you helped murder Stephen? Or what about you, people of St. Lawrence? Shall we shine a light into every corner of your lives, shall we work out exactly who you are and what you've done, and then shall we be really, strictly, exactly fair? Shall we give you each exactly what you deserve? Be very careful about what you wish for.

The Kingdom of God is not about fairness. It is about wild, unrestricted, boundless, hugely surprising and sometimes deeply annoying generosity.

Which is not quite the same thing as saying that what you do doesn't matter. Or that God is going to welcome everyone into his Kingdom completely regardless of who they are and what they've done. Left to itself, that might be the impression this particular Gospel passage creates – but it's not left to itself, there's plenty else in the Gospel that tells us God does care about what we do, and that our actions or lack of them do matter. There is such a thing as judgement, there are such things as consequences. But, and it is a huge but, that judgement is given by a God of wild generosity, by one whose heart is not fairness but gladness – pure, overflowing, abundant gladness. There will be more mercy in the judgement than we can possibly imagine – and for that, we should all be very, very grateful.

To our wildly generous God, who gives more than we can possibly deserve, to him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.