

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Canon Philip Banks
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 24 September 2017

No gloomy faces or chilling looks

Poor old Jonah. Don't you feel just a tad sorry for him? He's very cross indeed with God. You know the story well, I'm sure. Do re-read the short book of Jonah at home again – for its wisdom, its humour – and its parable-like quality, telling us something of who God is.

The book tells of God asking Jonah to go to the people of Niniveh and tell them to change their ways, or else face divine wrath and retribution – for they were apparently a most evil and corrupt people. You could liken it to one of us being asked to go alone to North Korea or an Daesh /ISIS stronghold and tell their leaders that they are misguided. Jonah knew that (a) they would ignore him and (b) that he would most likely end up incarcerated or worse. So Jonah disobeys God's request, and goes across the sea in the opposite direction. The story of him ending up in the sea, and then in the belly of a whale for three days - then being spewed up by the whale onto the shore - is well known.

Three days in the whale, dead to the world, and then coming back to life, has resonances for us in the resurrection story. As an aside – if you've been to our twin-town in Kvelaer, you may recall the Stations of the Cross in the friedhof there – sculptures which depict the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The fourteenth Station (depicting the resurrection) is a modern commission – and, rather than being a traditional 'resurrection' scene, the beautiful sculpture is of Jonah coming out of the belly of the whale, linking the onlooker back to the old testament, and the story we've heard today.

Here we are at the end of the story of Jonah. He is cross with God – almost a Victor Meldrew character: “I don't believe it!” God has not done what he said he's do the people of Nineveh. God has 'gone sofyt'. “I've preached damnation and judgement, just like you told me to – and then you go and forgive them – and you've made me look like a fool.”

Jonah's mindset is partly about his own pride. And it is partly about his perception of justice: God should do what's just – punish the wicked – otherwise who will take him and his prophets (like Jonah) seriously again? That's his complaint.

The compilers of the lectionary (the cycle of readings appointed to be read in church over a three-year period) are very clever today: they have put this with today's gospel reading, Matthew 20. The people in the vineyard too think that the landowner (for which read 'God') has gone soft and has slipping standards.

The 'theory of expectancy' is what drives most modern economies: when people see a clear link between performance and reward, they become more motivated and then productivity goes up – is how the theory goes.

This parable of the vineyard is actually Jesus's response to St Peter's question in the previous chapter (ch. 19 we've not heard today) when he says to Jesus “we've left everything - what reward will there be for us”? – the theory of expectancy is not a new thing!

Isn't there a bit of that in us? Don't you sympathise a bit with the folk who had been hired at the start of the day? “This lot have worked only an hour and you've made them equal to us who've slaved for you all day”.

Henri Nouwen writes this:

“God’s grace is not something you can bargain with or store up. What people get from having served God and the purposes of the kingdom is not reward for work done. God doesn’t make contracts with us, as if we could negotiate for a better deal. Rather he makes covenants with us, in which he promises us everything, grace in abundance, and asks of us everything in return. When he keeps his promise, he is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to his overflowing generous nature.”¹

This is the God of Ps 145: “The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, swift to bring kindness”.

This is the God of Matthew chapter 5 – we normally use just half of the verse in common parlance:

“The sun shines on the righteous and the sinner alike” – more correctly translated “God rains blessings on the righteous and the sinner alike.”

So if any of us is waiting for God to undergo some kind of personality transplant – and coming down to do a bit of gleeful smiting and punishing of bad people – we’re probably in for a long wait.

The dilemma for us is that we can feel that the world is unfair. Why doesn’t God act and stop the cruelty in Burma or of Daesh? Don’t we ask with Peter “what’s in it for us”?

And how does all this affect us as we go about our lives?

This isn’t some kind of woolly, liberal, humanist philosophy of ‘anything goes’. Rather what Jesus calls us to in this parable – all of us potential Jonahs or Peters – is to stop worrying about judgement or outcomes of prophecy or what God is going to do

to people who are bad in our eyes. We just need to concentrate on what being faithful to Christ’s call to live lives of integrity, joy, love, compassion, forgiveness, thankfulness. That’s what Jesus calls us to.

Many of you knew Fr Geoffrey Smith. And will mourn his passing following his death this week. Wasn’t he wonderful! Wasn’t it wonderful that we were all able to celebrate here with him last year on the 60th anniversary of his ordination. And wasn’t it wonderful that so many came to that!

We loved Fr Geoffrey not because he was judgemental or a Victor Meldrew. People came because Geoffrey led by example.

We have in our hallway, framed – a gift to us – one of the sayings of St Francis of Assisi done in beautiful calligraphy:

“Nobody in God’s service should have a gloomy face or a chilling look.”

That’s what we’re called to do. I read somewhere not to think of God’s grace as a piece of cake or pie – with *less* of it for us every time God gives some of it away (like to the vineyard workers of only one hour). Rather God’s infinite compassion and mercy and love is like a good joke or a fantastic concert or a beautiful sunrise: all the more living and life-giving for every person who shares in it.

And – by the way – by just concentrating on leading positive lives of thankfulness and we’ll have a lot more fun.

To pick up on Bishop Edward’s sermon last week: as members of the body of Christ we’re simply invited to see ourselves and those around us not as ‘worthy or unworthy’, not as ‘lazy or diligent’ – but as children of God and co-workers with him in the

world, to make the world a better place. That's what Jesus was – and is – about among us.

It's the way of the Lord – the path on which the family of God is set – and it is the way in which we will experience most fully who God is and what life – abundant life is like. Thanks be to God for that!

Philip Banks, September 2017

¹ Henri Nouwen: *The Genesee Diary*