

Sermon for 20th September 2026, Year A, Pentecost 17

Preached at St John's Baillieston

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

Sermon

I must admit to a certain fondness for both today's gospel reading and the reading from the book of Jonah. Both deal with our human understanding of what is fair and proper and show how different God's perspective and God's motivations are to our own.

In Jonah's case, you will probably remember the story of him being swallowed by the whale when he refused to follow God's instruction to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, to warn them of God's wrath if they didn't repent. Eventually, of course, he did go to Nineveh, and much to Jonah's irritation, the great and evil city *did* repent, and so God forgave them and didn't punish them. Jonah felt all this was deeply unfair. The city, after all, *deserved* punishment for its evil ways, and Jonah wanted to see justice done, not mercy and forgiveness.

Jonah expresses a very human response. If we're honest, we don't like it when other people are shown undeserved mercy, especially when we've carefully followed all the rules. We're more like the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. "Look", we say to God, or to anyone who'll listen, "I've been slaving hard for years with no gratitude, and this other selfish person swans in and gets given for free everything I've worked so hard to be worthy of.

Jonah's response is to sit down and sulk. 'What's the point of doing all this work for God', he grumbles, 'when all along he was just going to forgive everyone anyway'.

God tries to help Jonah understand the divine perspective by giving him the example of the bush, that grows up and protects Jonah from the heat of the day before being destroyed the following morning. I must admit it's not entirely obvious how that helps, but I'll do my best to explain it.

I suspect that what God is showing Jonah is a comparison between Jonah's intense love of the bush that had provided him shade for just one day, and God's love for the one hundred and twenty thousand people and many animals of Nineveh over a long period of time. Considering how upset Jonah was at the destruction of the bush, why should he be surprised at God's unwillingness to destroy a whole city?

The story ends abruptly and leaves God's question hanging, but Jesus picks up the same theme in many of his parables, such as this one about the vineyard workers all receiving the same daily wage, regardless of how many hours they'd worked. This is all utterly unjust of course, from a human perspective, especially if you think the parable is literally about good business management. What savvy business owner would pay a day's wage for an hour's work, especially if it upsets half your workers into the bargain.

But most ancient theologians didn't read the passage literally. They viewed those workers hired at different times of the day as representing different generations of God's people, such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, King David, the people of Jesus' day, and, eventually, the non-Jewish Gentiles, like us. All of them were considered equal workers in God's kingdom. Others interpreted the earliest workers as Christ's original disciples, and the latecomers as recent converts to Christianity, or saw it as a difference between those who convert early in life vs those who come to Christ on their deathbed. No matter how long someone has been a follower of Jesus and worked in the vineyard of the kingdom of God, the reward is exactly the same – salvation, forgiveness, compassion,

understanding, transformation, community – for an eternity that makes the initial time difference between first and last seem totally insignificant.

It is hard to imagine that anyone who has received these gifts in their fullness from God could ever begrudge someone else receiving the same, no matter how much or little time and effort they'd put into serving their community throughout their lives. It's been said that the deathbed conversion of the most terrible sinner brings as much joy in heaven as the constancy of a holy saint, who had been a monk or nun from the age of sixteen. But if we're honest, I think many of us would rather see grievous sinners punished, not redeemed. I've got a few names of people in my head that if I discovered they had been unconditionally forgiven and welcomed into heaven I'd probably be as angry as Jonah and the vineyard workers who'd slaved the full day under the hot sun.

If you happen to be one of those who is last into the vineyard of course, your perspective will be very different. For you, perhaps aware of your own unworthiness, God's love and forgiveness is overwhelmingly beautiful. You know you do not deserve any reward, let alone the glory of eternal life among the joyful community of the kingdom of heaven, and yet God has saved you and made you whole, and shown you just as much love as even the greatest saints have ever experienced.

The trick to moving away from the resentfulness of Jonah and the prodigal son's elder brother, is to realise that we are all, in fact, these unworthy sinners benefitting from God's mercy and God's free gifts. We are all the last ones hired for the vineyard. Jonah was in need of God's mercy as much as the Ninevites he wanted God to destroy, even if he doesn't realise it. Throughout the story, he is oblivious to the fact that God could have left him in the belly of the whale, but showed him mercy and saved him.

This is why so much of our Sunday liturgy involves repentance and an acceptance of our unworthiness. "We have sinned in thought, word, and deed," we confess

in the 2022 liturgy. “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table,” declares our 1970 liturgy. Some people don't like such grovelling, but I must admit that in my experience, those who know most deeply that they have been shown mercy by God, are the same people who are most able to let go of resentment and show mercy to others. As Jesus himself said about the woman who had washed his feet with her tears, “she has been forgiven much, therefore she loves much,” and likewise, “the one who has been forgiven little, loves little”.

So, I think the point of this parable of the workers in the vineyard is not to try to subvert mundane business practice, to try to get us to accept that everyone should be paid the same no matter how much work we do, but rather to demonstrate to us that the kingdom of God is entirely and always a gift, to which no one is entitled, but to which everyone is invited by God's generosity, goodness, and mercy – some earlier, some later, but for all eternity. Those of us who are last to be brought into the vineyard are often most aware of our need for God's forgiveness and mercy, but we are also the ones most aware of the astonishing gift we have received and are the most transformed by it. And this, I think, is why Jesus ends his parable with one of his most favourite and frequent sayings, “The last will be first, and the first will be last”.