

Sunday 24th September 24 – Trinity 15 – P20

Readings – Jonah 3.1 –4.11,

Philippians 1 v 21-30, Matt 20 v 1-16

One of the first acts of ‘**generosity**’ by God can be found in the book of Genesis (Ch18.23), and it came as a request from Abraham concerning the destruction of Sodom and all its people, where we find Abraham pleading with God, not to destroy Sodom if there can be found 50 righteous people living there. God granted that initial request to Abraham, and Abraham perhaps testing God, gradually reduces the number of righteous persons living in Sodom to 10. God accedes to Abraham’s request that if only 10 righteous persons can be found living in Sodom, then he God, will not destroy the city and its people.

In today's readings, there is perhaps one word which might describe their content – generosity - *'The Generosity of God'*.

In our Gospel reading today we reflect upon the rights of an employer to pay workers hired by him appropriately - reflecting a particular form of generosity. The word itself can be translated as 'Freely Given'. And it is, as a result of a 'generous God', one who freely gives, that we all perhaps owe our being here today. For that **generosity** involved the sacrificing of his only son on a cross of shame, in order that we might have life – and what's more, if we will accept it, have it in abundance. In the Old Testament reading set for today from the book of Jonah, Jonah had been told by God to go to Nineveh and warn the people that because of their wickedness he, God, was

going to destroy them. Jonah however, decided to flee to Tarshish to escape his responsibility, but ended up in the belly of the large fish before being deposited back on dry ground. So, for a second time God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, and deliver God's message. The response of the King and the people is to repent of their way of life, and it was to the people of Nineveh that God's **generosity** was now being extended. For despite their waywardness, it is on hearing Jonah's short sermon – nine words in the NRSV and five in Hebrew, that 120,000 residents of Nineveh repented of their apostasy and sought God's mercy. However, Jonah was not very pleased at this outcome, conveniently forgetting how merciful God had been to himself, in delivering him from the belly of the large fish,

after he had sought to escape from God's commission to call the people of Nineveh, back to God. And similarly, there is to be no escape from God's call to each one of us. We cannot escape God's purposes, but only respond trustfully, in the knowledge that God does not expect more of us than he knows that we can achieve.

For Jonah, the problem was not, that he did not want the people to be punished, but rather that having turned away from God, Jonah felt that a just God, must punish the wicked, otherwise who would ever take him – Jonah – or the other prophets seriously again.

Letting standards slip, could and does in some circumstances, lead to all sorts of problems.

But punishment and retribution are not always on God's agenda, and while there are times

when we perhaps would like to see God take action against those who perpetrate hideous crimes in the world today, we are reminded in scripture that we should never seek to avenge ourselves, or for that matter others, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, *'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'* And it is how God repays us, which is the subject of our Gospel reading today albeit in a different context. It is unlikely that in today's world, those looking after employees, rights would be happy with the landowner's way of dealing with his employees - far from it. But here we have a parable involving a landowner and his workers. The way that it was handled, would certainly cause problems in the world of work, and among the Trades Union movement, today. It was also likely to

create ill feeling and unrest throughout the market place, and end up with no one knowing what to expect. No doubt those first offered a job in the vineyard were very grateful to be employed. They agreed with the landowner to work for a fixed wage. As the day had gone on, the landowner had employed more workers, at various times of the day, thus making the task which the first group of labourers had agreed to undertake, easier, and perhaps enable the task to be completed within that day.

And just as Jonah, who thought that God should teach the citizens of Nineveh a lesson for their apostasy, became upset as he saw God refusing to punish them, so the workers hired at the beginning of the day, also got upset when they received their wages, being the same as those workers employed later in the

day, and forgot that they were themselves, still taking home a good, wage which would we can assume provide the necessary financial support for their families. So why should they, having agreed their daily wage, deny other workers the same benefits? So consumed are they by their feeling of injustice, that they cannot rejoice in their own good fortune in first obtaining work and secondly in receiving an agreed wage. Why could they not also rejoice in the fact, that the landowner had similarly blessed others?

The **generous** landowner mirrors and reminds us, of the **generous** God whom we have come here to worship today.

In the Epistle for today, Paul commends the example of the Christians in Philippi. For unlike Jonah and the disgruntled workers in the

vineyard, and despite the difficulties the Philippian Christians face, and the persecution that they have to endure, they remain steadfast, accepting the situation, which they find themselves in.

Paul, having endured much in his proclamation of the Gospel, offers himself as an example and encouragement to the Philippian community. For Paul's single-minded determination, seems to see everything that happens to him, even imprisonment, as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel.

What I wonder then is the cost to us of proclaiming the Gospel? It is perhaps not unnatural for us as humans to believe that having toiled all day and all our lives in the service of God, that we should benefit over and above others – even perhaps over newcomers.

Sometimes it is not easy for churches to accept new Christians into their community and to absorb them into the life of the church, because they might be preferred to our selves in some way or other. Sometimes the enthusiasm of ‘new’ Christians brings with it a different way of expressing that faith, and we find it disturbing, and can sometimes resent its impact. Change is not always easy or even comfortable for some. But the reality is that if we would see the church of Jesus Christ grow and become attractive to others, we must be prepared to embrace within it those who perhaps are not as steeped in the established traditions of the church as perhaps some of us older members are. We should not however feel hard done by. Remember, when the disciples spoke to Jesus about having given up

everything to follow him, they expected to be rewarded for that.

In Marks Gospel (10:28) we hear Peter saying to Jesus - *'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'* Jesus response to the disciples and to us today is the same -

'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age - houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Rights certainly are important but equally so are responsibilities. For the **generosity** of God is boundless, but that doesn't mean that we will

all be rewarded equally in this life. For we are told that a labourer is worthy of his hire. (Luke 10.7)

But this life is not the end – for Jesus has promised all of us, irrespective of who or what we are in this life, a reward which money cannot buy if we will accept it and that is – ‘eternal life.’

Peter Vickers – 24th September 2017