

'WORK' - Rector's sermon, 25 September 2011 (Trinity 14, Proper 21A)

The one thing we all know about Jonah is that he was swallowed by a whale (actually the bible isn't specific, it just says a 'great fish') and spent three days in its belly before being spewed up. This incident was to prove convenient for the early Christians, who used it as a symbol, or metaphor, of Christ's three days in the darkness of the tomb before his resurrection; the current daily prayer book of the Church of England includes a lament of hope based on the words of Jonah.

But what's the context of this story? The plot of the little prophetic book of Jonah (just 4 chapters) is rather curious. God calls Jonah to go to the great and wicked city of Nineveh and call its people to repent - but instead he runs away in the opposite direction; but to show that you can't flee from God, he gets shipwrecked and swallowed by the great fish. In his distress Jonah promises God that he will indeed do his bidding if he is spared, so when he is he has no choice but to obey. He goes and proclaims the word to the people of Nineveh. Lo and behold, it works - amazingly, the city does repent, big-style (even the king puts on sackcloth and ashes), and God spares them. But instead of being pleased and proud of his achievement, Jonah is angry: he reckons that they didn't deserve to be let off the hook. So we get the tale of the plant which shoots up in a single day; it provides Jonah with shade as he sits overlooking the city to see what will happen, and then just as quickly it withers and dies.

God tells Jonah that this is an object lesson, a parable, to remind him that ultimately all life is in God's hands. If Jonah is troubled about a bush, how much more should God be troubled and concerned for the many inhabitants of a great metropolis, however wicked it may have been? Like the Port of London in its heyday, Nineveh was a vast, cosmopolitan trading centre, and attracted all the vices and social problems that went with that. God's message to Jonah is, I care for all, and I will have mercy on all whom I choose, wherever they are coming from, whatever their past.

That's the background to today's gospel, the parable the labourers in the vineyard. It's a parable which in human terms seems grossly unfair - all get the same wage however long they have laboured, because that's what the owner chooses to do - and for those who are affronted by this, and think that rewards should be discriminating, the message is that God is kind to all without distinction.

We can read it in various ways. Let's start, in this season of trade union and party conferences, with a 'living wage' reading. For several centuries Christian social teaching (both Catholic and Protestant, in slightly different ways) has banged on about the dignity of human labour, of honest toil, and the need for this to be properly recompensed. (This was a theme of many of the activities and writings of Fr Groser, working in this parish in the 1930s and 1940s.)



Here is a famous and rather unusual picture by Ford Madox Brown from around 1860, which is displayed at Manchester City Art Gallery, where it will shortly be one of the main exhibits of an exhibition of his paintings. It's called simply 'Work', and has a text from Gen 3.19 below: *In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread* (the 'curse of Adam'). At the top are three other texts: *Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day* (2 Thess 3.8 - which is Paul on 'the labourer is worthy of his hire'), *I must work while it is day, for the night cometh when no man can work* (Jesus in John 9.4 - a text I regard as of dubious relevance, unless perhaps you regard it as a condemnation of shift work), and *Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings* (Proverbs 22.29).

It's a vision of the dignity of human labour - a highly romanticised one (Madox Brown was an early Pre-Raphaelite). Its inspiration was actually quite prosaic: the digging up of a street in Hampstead to lay sewers. At the centre are the hard-working navvies; passing by are some fastidious middle-class ladies; there are various other onlookers, including children, a flower seller up from the country (we could go into why he included all these); and most significantly, two of Madox Brown's heroes, the Christian Socialist writers Thomas Carlyle and the theologian F.D. Maurice, looking on thoughtfully (without getting their hands dirty).

So it's a painting (albeit, as I said, highly romanticised) about the significance of manual labour in human society - and its social, political and theological ramifications. Work (it says) should be honoured, not scorned, and properly rewarded. That's why, for instance, 150 years down the line Christians are actively involved in campaigns to secure a living wage for all in employment. The Living Wage Foundation calculates that it costs £8.30 an hour in London and £7.20 outside London to sustain a family; but many in full-time employment are paid far less than that. (We had the shocking example last week of a bunch of migrant workers who were kept in abject slavery and paid virtually nothing, but there are many other men, women and indeed children whose situations fail to hit the headlines.) And, of course, there are many (rather more than those who are benefit scroungers), who have no opportunity at all of honest work: whole communities where for two or three generations no-one has ever said 'I'll give you a job, and pay you a living wage'. And that's just in this country.

Now a living wage is exactly what is meant by the NT term 'denarius' - a day's pay, the sum necessary to sustain decent human living, and that's what the landowner offered to all the labourers in the vineyard - affirming their human need, their human dignity, without distinction. Unions might well say that he was behaving in an arbitrary manner, failing to offer a proper rate for the job, and nakedly flaunting his economic power (*am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*) But would they not applaud his recognition that all these workers needed decent take-home pay? Some may have failed to make the grade earlier in the day, when stronger, apparently more robust workers were chosen (this was the curse of the casual dock labour system in London - all depended on making a good appearance with the foreman). Others may have been work-shy and didn't show up till later. But unlike other landowners, this one did not discriminate, and made sure that they all got what they needed to sustain daily living, for themselves and their families. Of course, this doesn't provide a detailed basis for a modern-day pay and benefits policy, and that's not its point; but it does demonstrate God's concern for the welfare of all.

Another reading of the parable is what we might call the 'what about us?' reading - which is actually closer to the context in which Jesus told it. He was keenly aware that the Jews were affronted by his preaching, because he seemed to downplay the fact that they had borne the *heat and burden of the day*: they had been in on God's project from the start, they had laboured hard at keeping God's law - which was certainly burdensome, in every last detail. And yet newcomers, latecomers, were being welcomed into God's project on the same terms, and apparently with fewer demands made of them. *What about us?*

This was to become a key issue in the early church, as non-Jews took their place alongside former Jews, and many of St Paul's letters address this issue in detail. It's also an issue in the church today. We say on the one hand that we want everyone to come to living faith in God, and his Son, that all are welcome, that we want the church to grow. Yet sometimes churches are resentful of newcomers (just as Jonah was resentful of the fact that the Ninevites repented, at the 11th hour, and the early labourers in the vineyard of those who came later). They say, *we have slogged through the years to maintain the building, pay the parish share, keep the show on the road. Does such loyalty count for nothing, can others just walk in on equal terms?* I hasten to say that I am not accusing our congregation of such an attitude. Far from it - those who have certainly bore the *heat and burden of the day* would be the very last to think in such terms. But within the wider church it is a live issue, not least in relation to church plants. And it is an issue of which Matthew, in writing his gospel, was keenly aware. One of his major themes is that of 'reward': do we earn our place in God's kingdom, or what?

The answer is no: we do not, can never, earn a place in God's kingdom; it is all a matter of grace and mercy poured out on the deserving and the undeserving alike, on all whom God chooses to reward, and he makes no distinction. That is the radical heart of the good news announced by Jesus. God's reign subverts the natural human order, it turns everything upside down, as God casts down the mighty and lifts up the humble and meek; as God ignores the self-righteous claims of those who claim their long-service medals; as God has mercy on whom he wills.

And finally: the closing words of the book of Jonah (KJV) are *And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?* Let's not assume that God's plan is just about us; it is about the whole of his creation.