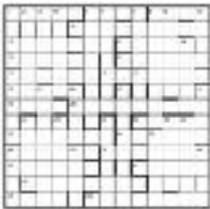


## The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity Proper 20

### Jonah and the Whale Bush: Jonah 3.10 - 4.11

*“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”*

Have you ever come across the German word *Schadenfreude*. It means being pleased when bad things happen to other people. It’s the *nom de plume* of one of the most fiendish crossword setters I know - others have called themselves after leaders of the Spanish Inquisition - and while I suppose he didn’t actually grin as we squirmed, that’s how it made us solvers feel. You’d get a preamble to the crossword like this, may the Good Lord help us...



Eleven clues have a letter misprinted in the definition; the corrections spell out what must replace letters that clash in 11 cells. The clashing letters specify whole thematic items exactly, and in three cases a secondary system must be used for the replacements. Number in brackets are the lengths of grid entries. The Chambers Dictionary (2016) is the primary reference.

Now I don’t suppose for a minute that any of you ever feel like that... But we do get upset when bad things happen to good people, and indeed sometimes (less nobly) when good things happen to bad people, which is what is happening to Jonah in this story about the bush - the second-best known one about him, rather in the shade of the first-best known (the whale) if you’ll forgive the pun.



Unlike the whale story, it’s not often depicted in art, but here is Rembrandt’s rather good drawing of it. And here is Jonah sounding very grumpy indeed:

*“But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.’”*

Jonah is particularly annoyed because saw all this coming. He actually understands God very well in principle. He’s just finding it hard to live his life that way.

*“And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ And the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.”*

So, God decides to try and get through to him and teach him a lesson in a way that he will understand: to help him in fact get inside God’s skin and feel what mercy is like for himself.

*“The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. <sup>7</sup>But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’”*

*But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ <sup>1</sup>Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>1</sup>And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’”*

Here's the question though. How can **we** get inside skin of others and the needs of the world, and so get beyond some of our less-great first reactions; and react with grace and mercy and steadfast love? Be more like Jesus, who was addressing a similar point in Gospel set for today - the story of the labourers in vineyard from Matthew 20. It would be easy just to leave things at a general exhortation to you to get a grip and do better; but I want to risk offering some possible practical ways forward (even if I myself am rubbish at them, but that is always a preacher's lot).

First, a reality check: is this a real problem for us? Do we really want blessings for those who hurt and annoy us? Think for instance about

- friends who had travellers in their office car park (they kept their cool admirably, but I'm not sure I would have done).
- that time when someone was really nasty after I'd done something they thought was wrong, though I didn't (it took me a whole year to work through my feelings and get the last stage below)
- or those stories of celebrities sunning selves on yachts away from Covid
- or even worse, cronies making money out of Covid contracts



So, what can we do? None of these are easy but I've found they do help:

- (1) get some distance, physically, and by listening to the viewpoint of others too. One of our grandchildren drew this picture in his UNICEF Paddington book and then felt bad that he had drawn himself smaller than his younger sister. Clever mum explained that he looked smaller because he further away. Calm was restored.
- (2) get close to God and argue if necessary. Think Job!
- (3) bite the bullet and pray blessing on your enemies and those who are cursing you. It's there in Matthew 5 43-45, which is perhaps the most challenging part of Sermon on Mount, but no less important for that:



*Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.*

Which is why I tend to extend the blessing at the end of the services a little bit further than those who add in a blessing for not just not those present but for those they love:

And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be upon you, upon those you love **and those you don't love**, now and for ever. Amen,