

Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Trinity.

Jonah 3:10 – 4end and Matthew 20:1-16

In case you've ever wondered how much a vicar is paid, the answer is a little over £26,000, which is a few thousand pounds below the median income, and if you do the sums dividing by 52 weeks and more or less 60 hours a week, comes out at about £8 per hour, just above the minimum wage.

Now, I'm not complaining. Far from it. I don't think vicars should be rich, and as a member of a congregation making my giving by monthly standing order, I want to know that I'm getting good value and that the Church is not wasting any money above the legal minimum on idle clergy swanning around their parishes drinking tea and trying to be nice to people.

I have a roof over my head, I don't starve, and all my family's needs are met provided we live simply and are not greedy. Moreover, I not only chose this life, I feel that I was chosen for this life, and I have a very fulfilling, challenging, and rewarding existence where I largely get to determine how I spend my time without having to answer to any idiot managers or fill out timesheets, or justify to anyone other than the Holy Spirit how the Lord's work is done at my hands. Priceless.

But the reason I am telling you this is because it's not just me – it's all the clergy in the diocese, and indeed in the Church of England. We all get the same regardless of experience or effort or size of parish, or family or individual circumstances. There is no performance related pay, no promotions, no bonuses, no extra points for responsibility, no financial reward for doing a good job or penalty for doing a bad one. It's like a universal basic income for the clergy, encouraged and enabled to find value in something other than money, from the newly ordained curate to the saltiest of old dogs.

And the inspiration for this may well have come from today's Gospel story, because it certainly is not what the world expects under competitive capitalism. All the workers get the same wage, exactly as promised, but some of them feel cheated because they feel they have worked harder. And it's interesting to note that they all started the day unemployed in the market place, and it has not taken them long to get over their gratitude for having a job at all before they are complaining about the wages. And that's socialism, because despite what we like to think we believe, we are often tempted to think that some people are worth more than others. But they are not.

Jonah was taught this lesson while waiting for the fireworks to begin. Despite the efforts that God has been through to save him, he doesn't think the citizens of Nineveh deserve forgiveness and cares more about the fate of a plant than he does about them. But God cares, and teaches him the lesson that people are more important than things, and equally so. And just like the London New Year celebrations for 2021, the Nineveh firework display is cancelled.

It is an important lesson for us, too, as we weigh up the consequences of health versus economics with the prospect of curtailment of our liberties in a further lockdown to control the coronavirus. If ever the voices become louder that we should let those who are vulnerable pay the price for our economic well-being, we should be prepared to shout even louder that a person's worth is not measured by his bank balance and that maybe we should take the time to be grateful for what we do have before we complain about what we lack.

The world does not owe us a living. It is a cruel and unforgiving environment for many people who struggle to make ends meet even without a pandemic. But the loving God who created us is keen to see us grow in Spirit with a generosity that overflows to those around us, responding to need rather than rewarding ability and having the humility to value other people by the image of God that we see in them and not by the size of their houses.

Amen.

