

Anger & Death!

Jonah 3¹⁰⁻⁴end; Psalm 145¹⁻⁸; Philippians 1^{21-end}; Matthew 20¹⁻¹⁶

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. [Philippians 1²¹]

As if it wasn't enough to have to cope with the COVID rule of 6, the increased restrictions those of us in Birmingham (and other parts of the UK) have to face, now you come to Church for a bit of comfort and a bit of a lift and what do you get in the readings? Anger and death! Real life may feel a little better, when you get back to it, after 10 or so minutes of anger and death!

- ✘ Jonah is angry with God because his preaching of judgement for Nineveh was effective and the people repented. It says **that God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon [Nineveh]**. Jonah berates God precisely because he is **gracious; merciful; slow to anger; abounding in steadfast love; and ready to relent from punishing**. His answer is to pray to die.

What makes you or me angry? What makes you or me angry with God? Righteous anger is when we use our anger to change things for the better. In that way, Jonah has no right to be angry because people responded to his preaching and repented. God then winds him up – a place to sit, a bit of shelter and then a worm to destroy it all. The lesson is surely that we should take things more seriously than God does!

I know that I was an angry teenager, an angry young man and that was almost a default position in life. That anger didn't achieve anything positive. Micha 6:8 is always a good test for anything: **what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?** Anger against injustice, indifference and impiety – that isn't just right, it is our duty to God and each other!

- ✘ The Gospel is full of angry workmen who wished they had joined a trades union! Can you hear the cries of those **who have borne the burden of the day and scorching heat**, who worked from 06:00 to 18:00. Surely they have a point! Beyond the parable, a fair living wage is a matter of justice that we can and should be angry about.

In the context of the parable, it is different. Should the thief on the cross have a back seat in heaven whilst those who have been faithful to Christ for their whole life get to sit just behind the martyrs? Should my cousin (twice removed of course) who was so well depicted by David Tennant on TV this week and who killed so many (assuming he did repent) get a seat in heaven with a restricted view whilst non-criminals get a clear view?

How little we understand of grace – none of earn it: it is a free gift. The trouble in heaven isn't going to be where people sit, but getting everyone in! Can you picture the scene of all these truly humble beings going, 'After you!' 'No!' 'After you!' Just as well we have all eternity there, because that's how long it will take to get in!

- ✘ Paul is ambivalent about whether he live or dies – such is his confidence in God that he knows that God is as much with him in life as he will be with God in death.

I remember watch the film 'The Bucket List' – it was on the school curriculum for 11 years and so I have probably, with different classes, seen it over 50 times. As two characters sit overlooking the pyramids and contemplating their on mortality, they remind each other of the two questions asked by the gods of the ancient Egyptians to see whether or not they get into heaven: *Have you experienced joy in life?* and *Have you brought joy to others?*

Paul realises that heaven has to wait until his work is done and so says, **I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith**. That comes when we live our **life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ** and when we accept that **God has graciously granted [us] the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well**. Instead of being angry at the suffering we may face, we embrace it.

Will we be remembered for our anger or for the joy we brought? Jonah cast a shadow over the message of hope by the way he responded and I pray that we – you and I – are not responsible for the shadow of anger but for the sunshine of joy!