

Sunday 20th September 2020: 15th Sunday after Trinity

I don't know if any of you have read David Thomson's sermon for this week. In his sermon David refers to the German word *Schadenfreude*, which means being glad at the misfortunes of others.

Just the evening before David sent his sermon to me, and I'm going to let you into one of my guilty pleasures here, I had been reading a Jodi Picoult book. I had been editing, and printing APCM reports all day, collating the resources for the weekly mailing, taken a funeral, the phone hadn't stopped ringing, AND worst of all, I'd had to update several risk assessments. That evening I turned to my guilty pleasure; Jodi Picoult to whom I turn when I need to just switch off and delve into a book that takes me away from the present for a bit.

In one of those strange coincidences, having never come across the word before, Jodi Picoult references the word *Schadenfreude* - being glad at the misfortunes of others.

Now our readings for today don't describe Jonah or the vineyard labourers being glad because something bad happened to other people, BUT they do very clearly show Jonah and the labourers getting angry because something GOOD has happened to people they do not think were worthy to receive the blessing.

We have the melodramatic Jonah throwing a strop that a 3 year old would be proud of after God did not punish the people of Ninevah:

Lord, I KNEW this would happen, that's why I ran away in the first place. I KNEW you would do this. Just let me die - I have nothing to live for now I know you have done this!

And the labourers, after watching gleefully as the later workers get their wage and assuming, of course they would get paid more, they had done more work, only to find they receive the same as the latecomers! Hey, how can you pay them the same as you've paid US, we've done far more work, we deserve more.

In both cases, the answer comes back; you worry about what you do, let me decide what I do with what is mine, or are you envious because I am generous? They would perhaps have preferred to be able to feel *Schadenfreude*.

If I'm talking to young people about God, there are a few questions that, I can predict I will get asked at some point. The conversation might go something like this...

So you're telling me that Jesus died for everyone? Yes

And everyone can get into heaven, right? Yes (now at this point there might be some qualifiers, but essentially yes, everyone CAN get into heaven)

So if I live my life doing just what I want and then on my deathbed turn around and say I believe then I'll get into heaven? Yes (again some qualifiers might come here, but essentially yes, even someone who believes only on their deathbed receives eternal life)

Why not just live as you want and then become a Christian before you die? (Now there is A LOT of unpicking to do there)

But then very often the conversation will turn to something like: so if the world's worst murderer becomes a Christian before they die, they will go to heaven? And of course the answer is, Yes.

As the hymn, To God be the Glory says: The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

It is at this point of the conversation that you see 1 of 2 things happening: either amazement that God's love reaches that far and that wide. OR something verging on disgust that God's love reaches that far and that wide.

Do we believe that God's love reaches that far and that wide, or do we like Jonah and the labourers, put limits on God's forgiveness, his grace or his favour? There isn't enough to go around so if I don't get my share, I will miss out. Lord, how can your love reach even those people over there?

When Jonah and the labourers saw people, unworthy in their eyes, receiving grace, generosity, forgiveness, who was it that missed out? Jonah felt it was better to die than to live knowing that God would spare Ninevah and show them forgiveness. The labourers grumbled to themselves, to each other and to the landowner, counting only what they felt they were owed, rather than recognise the generosity shown to others.

When we put limits on God's generosity, believing that others should miss out on it, or are not worthy to receive blessings. When we spend our time grumbling, not quite able to believe God's blessing being poured out over there, resenting it...well the love of God has a hard time breaking through that wall and it is we who miss out on delighting in God's generosity towards others.

When we put limits on God's forgiveness, either believing that 'they' do not deserve to be forgiven, or we cannot forgive them, or even we cannot forgive ourselves despite the fact that God has already forgiven us if we've come to Christ with our failures - well, the love of God has a hard time breaking through that wall and it is we who miss out on the freedom that forgiveness brings.

When we put limits on the grace of God and put boundaries on who should be allowed to be part of 'our' churches, or decide *that* church is not as good as ours, or I don't like what they do in that church - well the love of God has a hard time breaking through that wall and it is we who miss out on fellowship and breadth of experience.

The book of Jonah paints a picture of God loving those who are messing up their world - loving them enough to throw them a lifeline even when they don't understand, even when they haven't asked for it. Are we ready to be standing with one hand on the lifeline ready to draw people in, even if we do not understand what God sees in them, cannot understand how they can make such a mess of life and still be blessed by God? OR are we the ones who need the lifeline throwing to us because we have built up such a high wall between ourselves and the grace or forgiveness of God?

The parable of the labourers paints a picture of God being generous with those whom we might deem undeserving.

Are we ready to be standing with open hands, sharing the generosity of God that we have experienced, the resources we have, with those who perhaps don't even seem to be grateful, don't realise what it is they are receiving? Or are we the ones that need to open our hands to RECEIVE generosity from God or others? That can take an awful lot of humility.

Neither in the parable nor in the story of Jonah, does anyone miss out by the fact that everyone gets paid the same amount, or by God sparing Ninevah.

There is no limit to God's love, forgiveness or grace, except that which we create ourselves. And the limits that we put on God, only result in US missing out.

So why not just live as you want and then become a Christian before you die? Because we miss out on knowing the love of God for ourselves and for others.

Are WE amazed that God's love reaches that far and that wide. OR are we sometimes verging on disgust that God's love reaches that far and that wide.

Sadly, I could find no word, opposite to *Schadenfreude*, that expressed pleasure at someone else receiving blessing. Perhaps it's something we just need to live out, rather than only talking about it.

Amen.