**Sunday 24th September 2023**
**Proper 20 | Ordinary 25**
**The Rev’d Dr Janet Tollington**

**Call to Worship**

‘The Lord is gracious and merciful

**Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love**

The Lord is good to all

**And his compassion is over all that he has made’**

Come! Let us worship God together

*from**Psalm 145 :8-9*

**Prayers of Approach, Confession and Assurance**

Eternal God, God of grace and glory,

we come to worship and adore you.

The wonders and beauty of the natural world around us,

the splendour and complexity of the cosmos,

the rhythm of the seasons and of life,

all speak to us of your power and love for all that has existence.

We praise and thank you, Creator God.

The coming of your Son, Christ Jesus,

and his life among us, his death and resurrection,

all speak to us of your unending love.

We praise and thank you, Redeemer God.

The presence of your Holy Spirit,

alive and active in us, in your Church and in the world,

speaks to us your guiding, challenging, transforming power,

poured out in love.

We praise and thank you, Sustainer God.

Triune God, God of grace and glory,

we come to worship and adore you Gracious God,

as a company of your people we come also to seek your forgiveness.

Too often we have been heedless in our thoughts,

careless and even cruel in our words;

and shameful in our actions, We are sorry.

Too often we have been casual in our use of resources,

wasteful of your precious gifts,

indifferent to the consequences of our greed on others of your children.

We are sorry.

Too often we have turned our backs on a neighbour in need,

or closed our ears to a cry for help,

or pursued our own simple pleasures

rather than a tricky pathway that leads to peace.

We are sorry.

Gracious God, you have promised to forgive anyone who truly repents.

Have mercy on us, renew us by your Spirit

and help us to accept your forgiveness,

through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

**Prayer of Illumination**

Eternal God,

you have revealed your nature and purposes

through the scriptures and in Christ, the living Word.

Open our hearts and minds by the activity of your Spirit,

that we may grow in knowledge and faith;

and be encouraged as we walk in the way of Jesus. Amen.

**All Age Activity**

You will need some ping pong balls, a large receptacle for the balls (like a small bin) and some fake vomit! (You can find this in joke shops and online)

Ask the children what they remember about the story of Jonah and the big fish. You may need to prompt them or to read a summary of the story to them. When they or you get to the bit about Jonah being swallowed by the fish get them to throw a ping pong ball into the bin – representing Jonah ending up in the fish’s tummy. Ask them what they think it would have been like in the fish – smelly to be sure! What else might have been in the fish’s tummy with Jonah? Ask if they remember what happened next in the story – then uncover the joke vomit – you might want to brush it with some water to make it look fresh and/or get some fish bones or smelly fish to put with it just for that extra authentic experience.

The fish vomited Jonah out on the sea shore so he could follow God’s call. Later on the Bible God says he will vomit some people out of His mouth as they are luke warm. These aren’t pleasant images but we remember them! Sometimes when God asks us to do something He has many ways to ensure we hear Him – for Jonah this involved a very unpleasant trip in a fish’s tummy – let’s hope we’re better at listening to and following God than Jonah was!

*Andy Braunston*

**Readings**

*Jonah 3:10 – 4:11* |*St Matthew 20:1-16*

Sermon Notes

*Jonah 3:10 – 4:11*

This final section of the book of Jonah deals with God’s response when the entire population of Nineveh (and all their livestock!) unexpectedly repent of their wickedness and allow God to decide their fate – with no expectation of mercy; and Jonah’s petulant reaction when mercy is shown.

Like the rest of the book it uses comedy and exaggeration to teach about God’s sovereignty; and to remind us, as God’s people, that we are called to do God’s will – and not the other way round!

Israel’s prophet is presented in a bad light, complaining that God is making him, Jonah, look like a false prophet. Jonah wants God to destroy Israel’s enemies; and tries to coerce God into doing Jonah’s will, refusing to see things through God’s eyes and to rejoice with God over the transformation of Nineveh that has come about.

The passage shows the universality of God’s love and draws on imagery from the natural world to demonstrate God’s control over everything, great and small, on earth and in heaven; and God’s active involvement in events on earth. Alongside this it tells us that God continues to care for Jonah (representing God’s chosen people – including us), even though he’s been disobedient, recalcitrant, lacking in compassion, self-centred, etc and has effectively turned his back on God.

The book ends with a question directed at the reader (we find ourselves in the shoes of Jonah). We get concerned over things that become a focus of our attention for various reasons even though we have had no involvement in their origins or their development; shouldn’t God, the Creator and Sustainer of everything that exists respond positively towards any who have lost their way in life?

*Philippians 1:21-30*

Paul is writing from prison where the authorities have put him because of what he has been proclaiming about Christ. He doesn’t fear death, if that is to be his fate, because then he would go to be with Christ. However he doesn’t expect a death sentence because he is convinced that God still has work for him to do among the Philippians (and others probably too).

This idea could be explored in terms of a hard-pressed congregation that wonders if it is time to give up and close (i.e. die as a local church). The passage encourages belief that God isn’t finished with us yet (which I believe has been said by our General Secretary on more than one occasion about the URC).

The second half of the passage encourages the church to be united in the face of opposition and to be faithful in the way they witness to the gospel in their lives and proclaim their faith in Christ.

*Matthew 20:1-16*

This well-known parable of the workers in the vineyard is open to several different lines of interpretation, especially if it is read out of its specific context in the gospel of Matthew.

The workers who are hired first can be understood as the Jews with Gentiles/Christians being identified as the later workers. All are rewarded equally by the landowner – God.

Another way of reading it focuses on the generosity of God that exceeds anything that might be merited or expected by anyone who does anything to serve God (no matter how little). Reading the parable at a human level opens up issues of jealousy and feelings of injustice. Someone who has worked long and hard feels aggrieved when a latecomer, someone who has contributed little, receives exactly the same reward. This could lead into a consideration of what constitutes ‘fair pay’ in the labour market, whether differentials in basic pay for different kinds of work accord with the justice of God’s economy; or it might prompt ideas about workers’ rights. The final verse cautions against the thought that anyone is entitled to preferential treatment.

**Prayers of Intercession**

Creator God,

all that you have made is held in balance through your love;

but we know that human activity

is putting the whole fabric of the world in jeopardy.

Inspire us and teach us how to respect the earth and all the life it sustains.

Grant wisdom to those with responsibility to care for the environment

and the power to destroy it,

that the decisions they make may preserve its fragile balance

for the generations yet to come.

We pray, O God, for peace and reconciliation between the nations of the world;

and lift before you situations of conflict that lie heavy on our hearts today….

*(Pause)*

You have created us with different skills and aptitudes from one another;

and call us to use our abilities in ways that contribute to the wellbeing of society.

We thank you for the joy of fulfilling work;

but pray for those who find work an oppressive burden,

or a context in which they are abused or denied human dignity.

We pray for employers, for employees and for the self-employed

that you will bless their work and help them to establish healthy relationships

that reflect mutual respect.

We pray too for those whose essential unpaid work in the home

or community so often goes unnoticed and undervalued.

May they be accorded the respect that they deserve.

We pray for the unemployed,

unable to find work to support themselves and their families;

for those unable to work through infirmity;

and for those who have given up looking for work

and who feel useless or rejected.

Bless them, reassure them of their value in your sight

and guide them in directions that offer hope and lead to fulfilment.

We pray for those who have retired and give thanks for all their past work.

Grant that they may rest content.

May they continue to offer from their experience as they remain able;

but also have the wisdom to discern when it is right to step back.

Gracious God, we offer all these prayers,

together with our unspoken prayers for those we know and love,

trusting that you will answer in your mercy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**Offertory**

Generous God,

you have given so much to us and we are truly thankful.

All that we have is ours through your grace alone;

so we respond by dedicating our offerings to you.

We present our gifts of money for the work of your Church;

and we also offer to you our lives, our time, our talents, our intellects.

Accept and bless what we offer,

that all may be used in your service towards the coming of your kingdom.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

**Blessing**

May the blessing of God Almighty,

God the creator,

Christ the redeemer

and the Holy Spirit the encourager,

be with you all, now and forever, Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | *RS* | *CH4* | *StF* | *MP* |
| Eternal God, your love’s tremendous glory | 33 |  | 3 | 822 |
| Thou Whose Almighty Word | 38 | 112 | 106 | 699 |
| O Lord, all the world belongs to you | 90 |  |  |  |
| This Day God Gives Me | 79 |  |  |  |
| Oh, the life of the world is a joy and a treasure |  | 141 | 114 |  |
| Who put the colours in the rainbow? |  | 143 |  |  |
| The love of God is broad like beach and meadow | 108 |  |  |  |
| The Love of God comes close | 107 |  | 654 | 940 |
| The Church is wherever God’s people are praising | 583 | 522 |  |  |
| Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go | 521 | 529 | 550 | 159 |
| We pause to give thanks | 569 |  |  |  |
| God with humanity made one  | 650 |  |  |  |
| Sent By the Lord Am I |  | 250 | 239 |  |

RS – *Rejoice and Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*