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Dear Friends,

***Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
Or are you envious because I am generous? (Matthew 20:15)***

Mick's partner was in shock when I went to visit his widow the day after his sudden death. He had died of a heart attack on the roof of his shed at their allotment. It was the second costly roof repair in her family. My last visit to their home was to arrange for a rose to be planted in the churchyard above the cremated remains of a son who died falling from scaffolding on a building site. I had also visited following the suicide of her eldest son. This was her second marriage and now all three men in her life were gone and she was sobbing "life is so unfair.....why me, why me....we must be really bad..."



I was not there to judge. Jesus did not deserve to die, he too felt forsaken as he hung on a cross. Mick had been a character with a bit a reputation in our village. As we walked our dogs in the woods, he would share stories of his conquests until he realised I was the Rector! Weeks before his own death, following the funeral of another member of the community, he told me that he was unlikely to have a church funeral when the time came because he'd been, "anaughty boy." As Frank Sinatra sang, "I did it my way", we carried Mick's broken body into church and gave him the "proper Christian funeral" his widow longed for. In a moving eulogy delivered by merciful friends we heard about Mick's generosity and kindness towards those in need rather than his many shortcomings. In "a twinkling of an eye, at the last trump" he was transformed. Thank God. Mick was our local saint, his shortcomings were quickly forgotten and we sinners heaved a sigh of relief that there might be hope for us too.

I remembered Mick today as I thought about the prophet Jonah and the workers in the vineyard. Listening to the stories together we discover that the One God of the Hebrew bible is as merciful as The Word made flesh, God's Christ whom we meet in the New Testament. Neither Jonah nor Jesus' closest friends, neither Mick nor his grieving widow, truly understood this.

When God called Jonah to travel to Nineveh to preach against its wickedness he boarded a boat going in the opposite direction to Tarshish. As the boat begins to sink, Jonah's fellow sailors realise God has stirred up a storm because of Jonah's disobedience. Reluctantly, the sailors sling him overboard where he spends three dark days and nights praying in the belly of a huge fish that God has provided. Moments after the fish sick him onto the beach God's call comes to Jonah a second time. Realising there's no escape, he reluctantly goes to Nineveh to proclaim God's message. Jonah is petrified, for Nineveh was the capital of the wicked Assyrian empire whose conquests and violence were known throughout the world. Assyria had captured, scattered and nearly destroyed Jonah's own tribe, God's very own people. When the people of Nineveh respond to the message, repent of their sins and cover themselves in sackcloth, God refrains from punishing them and poor, poor Jonah feels he has been made to look like a complete fool. "O Lord" he yells, explaining why he ran away, "I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing". He did not want to go to Nineveh in the first place for fear God would forgive his enemies and he would feel betrayed.

Jonah chooses to forget that God, in his infinite mercy, forgave him too when after three days he was raised from the belly of a fish. Jonah has no desire to believe in a God who forgives his own people's enemies. Jonah neither sees nor cares that an entire city, perhaps the most evil city in the world, has been converted following his sermon. He could have dined out on that story for years but Jonah simply sees injustice.

Jonah is not alone. We too feel a sense of moral outrage when people do not get their “just rewards” We learnt to say, “it’s not fair” as infants, and we are still saying it today. Like the workers in the vineyard we believe people should be treated fairly and equally in the workplace. Equal pay for equal jobs we plead. How dare the landowner pay those who only worked for a few hours as much as those who worked all day in the heat of the sun? Have we forgotten that the men who stood waiting in the heat of the day were not just hungry for work but desperate to feed their families that night? Just like jealous Jonah who cannot feel the joy of the newly converted, the labourers in the vineyard are consumed by resentment and cannot celebrate with those who can eat that night.

It’s easy to imagine Jonah and the jealous workers are stories about other people, but are they really? Can it really be true we wonder that others will turn up at the last moment and receive that same blessing we’ve worked for? Surely not!

Only when I survey the cross do these stories begin to make some sense; generous forgiveness and reckless love defeat the powers of sin and death. If God in his wisdom has called you and me, unworthy as we are, to his table then let’s celebrate and make space for others at the feast.

Yours in Christ,

Vicki

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