

Homily – 10th March 2019 – 6 pm

There are occasions when I find myself wincing slightly at the wording of the scriptures. The story of Jonah is one of those that is entertaining, fast-moving, and has the virtue of being only 4 chapters long. What's not to like? Except that I really do struggle with the way God is portrayed. That final sentence of today's reading is one of my wince moments: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." It seems to raise so many questions. About the nature of God – and indeed God's grace. About why bad things happen. About whether bad things can be prevented.

So far, so frustrating. And I really do find the way God is portrayed in Jonah problematic.

But I wonder whether there is a way that it can be helpful in the context of this evening's reading – being set alongside the Gospel passage we have also heard.

Have you noticed the inherent risk in this familiar parable? As we listen to the Pharisee congratulating himself for his righteousness, how easy it is for us to slip into congratulating ourselves for not being like the Pharisee. Can that be right? It feels like no sooner are we in that place than we open ourselves up to the criticism that Jesus is levelling at the Pharisee.

Where the Pharisee is going wrong is not really in what he is doing. He's quite right to suggest that he is a righteous man. He reads the scriptures, prays regularly, fasts and is generous in his giving. These are indeed noble, righteous actions. The problem is in his self-congratulation. In his belief that he is achieving these things in his own strength. That it's all down to him.

The tax collector, by contrast, recognises above all his own weakness. His reliance on God. He knows that he is a sinner, dependent on God's mercy.

The thing is, we all like a bit of recognition, don't we? A bit of exaltation, even. And let's be clear, it certainly isn't wrong to celebrate when things go well and to thank people for things they have done. But perhaps the sign of danger for each of us is where we begin to compare ourselves with others. Because it strikes me that it is at that point that we move from recognising something done well to relying on our own strength – and assuming that our every achievement is down to us. And that is surely a risky place to be.

While there is much that challenges me about Jonah, what is not in doubt throughout the book is that God takes centre stage. Whatever we think of the interpretation of God, it is always taken for granted that God should be right at the centre of our lives and our decisions.

We live in a world of comparison and of self-reliance. We are brought up to believe that all things are within our strength to achieve. And to a significant extent we measure ourselves against our achievements. But those are not the standards of God. The moment we begin to thank God that we are not like others, we have entirely missed the point: we are both utterly unique and *exactly* like everyone else, and totally dependent on God for our very being – and God's love extends to each and every one of us, just as we are, whether the world considers us a success or a failure.

The tax collector's breast-beating may strike us as a little excessive, but his understanding of the merciful nature of God certainly isn't. And when we come to our senses and remember that we're children of God and recognise our need for God's mercy, we are always embraced with love.

Amen