

Let me begin by telling you why our reading from Jonah, that was set to today, makes me very, very happy. It brings back wonderful memories, for me, of my college days. When I was at college, I was one of the two Bible clerks in the college chapel. There was me and my good friend, Glen. And our main duty as Bible clerks was to read the lessons at all the chapel services and occasionally to say a Latin grace in a posh dinner. And Glen made the discovery, very early on in our Bible clerk career, that you can insert the phrase, "And also much cattle," which features in today's Old Testament reading, you could put that phrase into any Old Testament passage that you care to read. I challenge you, after this video, just to open up your Old Testament anywhere. Put your finger randomly in a page, find a paragraph and see where you can insert the phrase, "And also much cattle." I guarantee it'll go in there somewhere. You'll find a place to fit it.

Glen did that for all three years of his college career. Every time he stood up to read the Old Testament lesson, we knew, those of us who were friends, that he was going to include the phrase, "And also much cattle." Which would make a few of us giggle in our pews. One Sunday, a very meek and mild young man called David got up to read the Old Testament lesson. It was the passage we've just heard read, Jonah chapter four. And the reading ends like this, "God said, should not I spend Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand? And also much cattle?" There was much giggling around the chapel when we heard this. We noticed that our chaplain was not amused. And after the service had finished, we all went into his rooms for sherry. He made a beeline for David and he pinned him down and said, "I've heard about Glen's ruse. I don't think it's very funny. I think it's disrespectful." Poor David went very, very red and blushed and just splattered out the words, "Well, it was in the reading. I just read what was in the text." Of course we burst out laughing again. How ironic. The one time someone had noticed the phrase was the one time it was actually in the text. It doesn't take much to make me very happy. I'm very easily pleased. So those memories came flooding back as I looked at the passages set for today. But I also noticed, in that reading from Jonah, that there's a dark side in it. It's actually a reading that's full of anger. There are five references, in those few verses, to anger.

Jonah gets very angry at the start of the passage. Where he declares, "I'm angry enough to die." And there's anger in today's Gospel reading as well. Those who worked in the vineyard, or in the field all day, get angry and grumble at the end of the day when they get paid the same as the Johnny come lately's, who only worked for an hour or two.

There's anger in our readings. And I'm sure you'll agree that there's also anger, too much anger, in our world at the moment. In 1994, the Gallup organization created what they called a hostility index. And they worked out the angriest places in America. The hostility index was based on a nine question scale that asked people about how they felt about loud rock music, traffic jams, and queuing up in supermarkets. You won't be surprised to hear, perhaps, that New York topped the list of angry places in America.

But I think that this pandemic has meant that even our lovely laid back San Diego has risen to New York levels on the hostility index. I don't know about you, but I've felt the anger of others several times recently. Once on a bicycle. I was cycling down Fay Avenue, in the bike lane, when a gentleman on the sidewalk made it pretty clear to me, at a very high volume, that he thought I was getting too close to him. A similar thing happened in Home Depot. I was trying to push around one of those large carts, one of those really heavy things where it has four wheels that seem to be able to go simultaneously in four different directions. And I was struggling with this thing. And a woman screamed at me, "You're too close! You're breathing my air," she said. So I panicked and tried to move away from her, which just meant that I went closer and the end of my cart hit the end of her cart.

And she said, "And now you're touching me." I walked away. I could go on. But actually all I'd be doing, if I did, would be hiding from the fact that I feel the anger building up in me in this time of pandemic, that I feel deeply frustrated and angry at this virus and other things that are happening around us. That anger that's welling up comes out, not always when I expect it to, but it often comes out in silly ways. Things I really shouldn't be angry about, but I recognize the anger that's building up deep inside.

I've heard that psychologists talk about three different types of anger. Justifiable anger, aggressive anger and annoyance anger. Jonah's anger, and the anger of the worker in the vineyards, they were of the latter two types of these three types, I would suggest. Jonah was angry because he'd been sent to the city of Nineveh to preach a message of judgment and to his dismay and bewilderment, the Ninevites actually responded to his preaching.

They repented of their sins and God showed them his kindness and mercy. The tables were turned. Jonah went to preach to this foreign nation and they ended up teaching him. And that annoyed Jonah, he felt as if his prophetic honor had been slighted. He wasn't the prophet of doom that he'd hoped. Through his ministry, God had reached out and shown his love and grace to foreigners,

and not any old foreigners, but to the Assyrians, who were Israel's sworn enemy. This, we're told, displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was very angry. But look what it says next, "And he prayed unto the Lord."

Jonah, thereby, joins a very long list of biblical figures who pray to God when they were angry. Moses got angry with God when he thought God was mistreating his people. Naomi got angry with God after the death of her husband and two sons. Habakkuk complained bitterly to God. Job was angry with God for a whole host of reasons. And the Psalmist got so angry with God that he threatened to bash the heads of the babies of his enemies against the rocks. You'll never hear that bit of the psalm in church. We edit out the angry bits. But it's there in scripture. Saint Paul offers some sound advice, "In your anger, do not sin, and don't let the sun go down on your anger." There's nothing wrong with being angry, but it does matter what we do with it. How we express that anger. And one thing we can do with it is express our anger to God.

A biblical scholar said, "When studying the book of Habakkuk, far from being a sin, proper remonstrance with God is the activity of a healthy faith relationship with him." God understands that we get angry. Jesus himself got angry. God knows that we have plenty to be angry about. Anger is a natural emotion. We need not to be afraid of it, but to own it, especially in these angry pandemic times. And I want to draw out two lessons from these readings for this time. The first is that Jonah got angry because things didn't work out as he planned. He discovered that God's plans are far bigger and far more gracious than we can ever imagine. Jonah needed to learn, we all need to learn to hold lightly to our hopes and plans. Jonah wanted to control everything. Even the response to his own preaching. He could have left that in God's hands, but he didn't and he got angry.

And when he was out in the heat, stewing, God provided a plant to give him some shade. He got upset when the plant went away, but he never gave thanks for the plant when it was there. Jonah didn't see the plant as a gift and he didn't enjoy it when he had it. He simply got angry when it wasn't there. His anger grew out of a loss of proper perspective and an unhealthy sense of his own importance. He was more concerned with the loss of the plant than the thousands of the people who lived in Nineveh.

There are things we should be justifiably angry about, but like Jonah, we're too often angry about the wrong things. And anger so often skews our thinking. We should stop sometimes and ask ourselves the question that God posed to Job, "Doest thou well to be angry?" God said to Jonah:

Jonah, next time you feel your blood starting to boil, ponder that question. The workers in the parable could have asked themselves the question. They were paid what they were promised, they weren't cheated. They weren't angry about what they received. They were angry about what the others received. They were angry at the kindness and the generosity of the boss. Did it do them well to be angry? I don't think so. Let's learn to give thanks for what we have. Let's see everything as a gift.

The second lesson I think we could draw from this passage is the fact that this chapter, the passage we've just read, Jonah chapter four, is actually the end of the whole book. It's the end, but everything's left unresolved. The last words of Jonah are, "I'm angry enough to die." We leave him in his anger. We never know if he gets over it, whether he makes up with God. We don't know, he's left pouting, looking over the city at the end of the book that bears his name. We're not told what happens next. The narrator finishes the whole story, the whole book, with the immortal phrase, "and also much cattle."

We're living in a time when so much seems to hang unresolved. I remember thinking in March, "Oh, we'll be back in church by Easter." Then in the spring I thought, "Well, everything will be back to normal when I get back from my summer holidays." Now I hear people saying, "Well, I'm not doing anything until we have a vaccine." And I've come to realize that there won't be a day, anytime soon, when we can declare that this pandemic is over. The situation is remaining unresolved for some time yet. We need to learn to live with that lack of resolution. We need to learn to live with uncertainty. We need to find a way of living with a lack of resolution and closure, knowing that God is with us in that way of living. Today is Rally Sunday, it's the day when the rector traditionally lays out hopes and plans for the year ahead in church life.

I can't do that this year. And maybe that's no bad thing. I need to learn the lesson that Jonah learned. That we can't control how things work out. God will always surprise us. We need to remain open to our God of surprises and trust that He is at work in the midst of all this mess and chaos. Rather than reveal my plans for the church year, I invite you to join me in praying that we will be given the grace to discern the leading of God's Spirit, amidst the uncertainty, the anger and the lack of resolution. Amen.