

REFLECTION FOR THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

(20.09.2020)

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Readings: Jonah 3.10-4.11 & Matthew 20: 1-16

As well as all the usual coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic situation, which is becoming increasingly disturbing once again, there's been another story that's rumbled on in the news this week.

Despite widespread condemnation of it, the *Internal Market Bill* passed its second reading in the House of Commons on Monday. If introduced, this law will override the agreement that our Government reached with the EU and signed up to in January. Understandably, concerns have been raised as to whether anything in the bill would breach international law. Northern Ireland Secretary, Brandon Lewis, speaking in the Commons last week, was remarkably candid in his response to a direct question on this matter. "Yes, this does break international law in a very specific and limited way". Cue open mouths and aghast faces all around.

The implication of him using the phrase 'very specific and limited' is surely that our Government believes it acceptable to break a law if it suits us to do so and if we only do it a little bit.

A friend of ours, Ant, is an Anglican priest. We trained together. Highlighting the ridiculousness of Mr Lewis' wording he recently set his Facebook friends a challenge. In doing so he's managed to reverse the words in this phrase but the point remains the same. Here's the challenge: *Ruin a Bible verse by adding the phrase "in a very limited and specific way"*.

He gave an example to start people off: "God is Love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them in a very limited and specific way."

Here are some of the suggestions he subsequently received:

- "God saw everything that he had made, and it was very good. In a limited and specific way."
- "Thou shalt not commit adultery...in a limited and specific way."
- "I have come that they may have life, and life to the full, in a limited and specific way."
- "A new commandment, I give unto you, that you love one another...in a limited and specific way."

Feel free to play the game yourself but you get the point. One of the overriding themes to emerge in the midst of these responses was that firmly held biblical belief that there is nothing limited or specific about the way in which God loves either the world or its people. To claim otherwise would be blasphemous. So just as countries can either choose to abide by international law or not, it's similarly clear cut - we can either believe that God's love is limitless or not. We can't just add caveats in order to ease our consciences or so that we can have things just the way we want them. Sometimes the limitlessness of God's love will make us

feel uncomfortable about our own thoughts and actions, beliefs and prejudices - but that's surely the point. God's love is meant to be challenging as well as comforting.

People have always struggled with this, it seems. Scripture speaks with many voices and within its pages we discover the stories of those who'd go to remarkable lengths to avoid engaging with all that God's love means and brings and the uncomfortable truths about ourselves that it reveals. Take Jonah. He was so convinced that God would end up forgiving those dreadful people of Ninevah that when God calls him to go there and warn them that they need to change their ways or else, Jonah flees in the other direction. After the famous incident with the storm and the big fish, Jonah reluctantly does what God asks of him and in an instant becomes the most successful prophet ever. The Ninevites respond well, change their ways and God lets them off any punishment that otherwise would've come their way.

But then, as we've heard today, Jonah, believing that the Ninevites deserve any punishment that comes their way, is angry and throws a right strop. "I knew you'd do this, God. I knew you'd forgive them," he rants. 'I knew that you're a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and not in the very limited and specific way that I want you to be.' Expecting to see the Ninevites soon slip back into their old ways and see himself proved right, Jonah sits down on the outskirts of the city, prepared to wait it out. Then follows that wonderfully cartoonish fig-tree-munching-worm scene that God uses to remind Jonah that there's every reason to care for the 120,000+ inhabitants of Ninevah; that it's not for Jonah to determine who is or is not worthy of God's love. Maybe this is, in part, why Jesus told the story of the labourers in the vineyard. For all that this parable is intended to serve as an illustration to Jesus' previously made point - namely, that, in the kingdom of heaven, 'many who are first will be last, and the last will be first' - isn't this, in itself, a reminder of the limitless and abundant nature of God's love? The story seeks to remind us that all are invited to participate in the work of building God's reign of love - the eager, committed, willing and talented, certainly, but also the excuse-filled, lazy and work-shy; those who'll devote their whole lives to the work and those who are content to just turn up for a few minutes in the hope of some kind of paycheck; in other words, the people that anyone would want in their team and those who most wouldn't even dream of looking at let alone approaching with a job offer - and all are valued and rewarded equally.

Which poses the question - how do you feel about this? How do we *honestly* feel about this? Are we fine with it, relaxed that each and every person on this planet is equal in God's sight? Or are we, like Jonah and some in Jesus' story, uncomfortable and unhappy, angry even, at the very suggestion - believing that some are more deserving of God's love than others? In other words, are we only happy to talk about God's love providing that we can do so "in a very limited and specific way"? These two Bible stories remind us of the hard, uncomfortable truth that we can no more reduce God's capacity to love to suit that which is comfortable to us than we can claim that it's acceptable to break international law as and when it suits. But if we're going to be critical of those who'd do the latter, doesn't the former suggest that, however much we might disagree with some people, despise what they represent and stand for, oppose what they're doing and want them to change course, we have to acknowledge that God loves them just as much as God loves us and that we need to love them too?

And that's the point at which I know that I'd far rather talk about God's love in a very limited and specific way. None of this is easy, is it?