

Readings for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

20th September 2026

First Reading: Jonah 3:10-4:11

When God saw what the people of Nineveh 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. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord God appointed a bush and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort, so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?

Second Reading: Philippians 1:21-30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Gospel: St Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said to his disciples: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

A Reflection for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

from Rev'd David Higgon

Today we celebrate the 3rd Sunday in the creation season, and it gives us an opportunity to examine the interrelationship between economics and ecology. Indeed, both words. economy and ecology are derived etymologically from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning home; and there is a close interrelationship between ecology and economy when we consider our responsibility toward our common home,

Throughout his ministry, Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom, as something that was near and close at hand yet not here yet, and he used stories, parables, to explain to people how radically different the kingdom of God is to that which his audience were experiencing under Roman rule, and how the values of God's kingdom turn the world upside down. This was the inversion of status in a strictly hierarchical society. The last will be first and the first will be last.

Our reading today from Matthew's Gospel is a case in point. It is the story of the workers in the vineyard that challenges our ideas about fairness and reward. In our story, labourers are hired throughout the day, at different times of the day. Early in the morning a landowner goes into the marketplace and hires a number of labourers to work in his vineyard who agree to work for the usual daily wage, then later in the morning more labourers are hired and more at mid-day, more midafternoon and even more in the late afternoon, and he tells them that they will be paid 'what is right'. At the end of the working day he tells his manager to pay the labourers, beginning with the last to be hired, and he pays them the usual daily wage. The labourers hired at the start of the day, those who have laboured in the vineyard from dawn to dusk, are expecting to be paid more because they have worked longer in the vineyard, but they are disappointed because they too receive the usual daily wage.

What is going on here? This seems so obviously unfair to those who have laboured longer than those hired at the end of the day. This flies in the face of what we would consider to be economic justice, and if I had been one of those hired early in the morning, I would be straight around to speak to my trade union representative!

I studied economics and economic history, for my A levels in the late 1960's. and later at university, where the idea prevailed that economics was a technical science operating outside moral judgment. Economic theory and history were subjects that were value neutral, this was at the time of the halcyon days of that post war period when what was called Keynesian economics held sway. It was time of full employment when we had a mixed economy when industries like coal and steel were owned and operated by the state alongside a regulated private sector, and we had a welfare state funded by taxation that aimed to eliminate poverty and want. Yet even in the economic stability and growth of the post war years no one was advocating anything quite like what Jesus was advocating in 1st century Palestine.

I have never come across Jesus's name in any economic textbook, and yet his teachings in the parable of the labourers contains a radical economic and moral challenge that challenged the economics not only of his own times but also the economics that prevail today. Jesus lived in a land occupied by the Roman's that was exploited for the benefit of the Roman empire, Palestine was a military state under imperial domination, with a highly stratified hierarchy, with a wealthy elite and with the landless, the poor, slaves, the sick, at the bottom of the pile. Jesus' message directly challenged the idea that wealth signified virtue and that poverty was an indicator of failure. For Jesus, justice began with care, mercy and compassion and not status, and that implies that a society should be judged by how it treats those who are the least amongst us.

Jesus was advocating an economy based on compassion when, at the time, he was living in a society structured by Imperial Rome, where elite landholders possessed the land and small farmers were driven into debt and families into servitude. This was an economy still based on slavery and indentured labour, where most labourers would be living from hand to mouth. Jesus repeatedly returns to the themes of release, forgiveness, and inverting the social order. This was not an abstract spirituality but a direct commentary on economic injustice.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus speaks of the inversion of status: the last shall be first; elsewhere he says that the meek shall inherit the earth; the poor are blessed, and the wealthy are advised to share their riches with the poor. In a society where wealth conferred status and power, his teaching cut directly against the belief that prosperity was a sign of virtue. Instead, he emphasised that compassion and justice mattered more than the accumulation of wealth. This inversion exposes the moral emptiness of any system that celebrates wealth while ignoring the suffering of the other.

Jesus' focus on healing, feeding, and inclusion was a declaration that the structures of society should be arranged so that no one is left outside the circle of care. His teachings imply that compassion is not a private virtue but a public responsibility, in practical terms this means the access to good health, housing, education should be available to all, and not just the wealthy. Today as in Jesus' day, people on the margins are regarded as being disposable, and to see anyone in this way is to betray the essence of what it is to be a community.

Jesus' teaching tells us that economics cannot be morally neutral. Decisions about taxation, debt, labour, land, and care are essentially decisions about justice. They determine who is safe and who is vulnerable, who flourishes and

who is to be left behind. Economics is not a science operating outside moral judgment, but rather, society is accountable for the conditions it creates. If the pursuit of wealth victimises the poor, erodes community, or engenders fear, then that is morally indefensible. In our gospel reading all the labourers receive the same daily wage because each family needs enough to live.

The landowner's generosity reflects God's kingdom, where dignity and sufficiency matter more than competition and profit. The vineyard itself is central to the story. Vineyards depend upon healthy soils, reliable rainfall, biodiversity and to be worked in a way that doesn't take more from the land than the land is able to give. The story reminds us that human work is embedded within creation, not separated from it. Jesus teaches that God's kingdom overturns human assumptions about wealth and success. In God's economy, justice is measured not by how much individuals accumulate but by whether all people— and the Earth itself—have enough to flourish.