Each of this morning’s readings – the twenty-ninth psalm, the closing verses of the book of Jonah and the first five verses of the Revelation to St John the Divine – is about revelation. As a theological category, revelation has a rather forbidding aura. It sounds incontrovertible, lapidary: ‘the voice of the Lord that breaketh the cedar trees… and shaketh the wilderness of Cades’.

But that is only one side of revelation. Think of the opening of this morning’s second reading, those strange words: ‘and there was silence in heaven for about half an hour’. Even amidst the timeless eternity of heaven, it seems that God communicates in silence as well as sound; not just in action, but in refraining from action.

Revelation, properly understood, need no always be an edict delivered from on high. ‘The voice of the Lord is mighty in operation’, but it also gives ‘the blessing of peace’ – and its might accommodates itself to our weakness. Revelation is of God, but precisely because it is of God it is not straightforwardly deliverable to us, who are not God. It comes aslant, unfolding a mystery and enfolding us within it. This is ‘the mystery made known… by revelation’ of which Paul writes in Ephesians (3:3), the mystery into whose fellowship we are drawn (3:9). A mystery which will bewilder us, rather than batter us with its truth.

One of the glories of this Cathedral is the west window in the north aisle. Its location means that it is easily missed on a Sunday, but it is a daily blessing to those who attend morning worship during the week. The window, in exquisite painted glass by the seventeenth century Dutch artist, Abraham van Linge, depicts the prophet Jonah. The glass is alive with colour and detail, especially on a sunny day [like today]. The sun, top left, shines in a rich gold, a gold picked up in the gourds on the bush that shelters the prophet. The foliage of the trees is wonderfully subtle in its shading: vivid green dominates at first, but as you spend longer with the window you see how beautifully realised each leaf is in its detail of colour and line. The city of Nineveh fills the whole of the right panel, spilling over into the left panel, as if it cannot be contained. Here the artist shows us the extent of this ‘exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across’ as it was described in last week’s reading. No city of this era can have been anything like so big, but the book of Jonah and our window both evoke the sheer weight of responsibility that falls upon the prophet, called to proclaim the Lord’s word to its people.
And then there is Jonah himself. Tucked away in the bottom left corner of the window, he is easily missed at first; but once you have spotted him, you see that he is the key to the picture, the centre of its internal perspective. He is a wonderfully ambiguous figure: ambiguous both in the window and in the book named after him. His posture, his facial expression, even the position of his hands, are all beautifully drawn. At first you could mistake his demeanour for one of settled prophetic wisdom: the Lord’s servant calmly surveying the task he has been set. But our Jonah also displays the self-pity, the anger and the despondency that are the unattractive hallmarks of the prophet in this morning’s reading. This is a man, a prophet, overwhelmed and bewildered by the Lord’s call. The detail, colour and scale of the images in the window all bear down upon him: this is a weight he feels he cannot carry.

The ambiguity of van Linge’s Jonah is faithful to the ambiguity of the Jonah we find in the pages of the Bible. Jonah is an anti-hero. Sent to proclaim the word of the Lord to the people of Nineveh, first he runs away. When miraculously he is rescued and returned to his task, he enjoys instant success. Hearing God’s coming judgement, the Ninevites repent in sackcloth and ashes and amend their ways. But instead of rejoicing, Jonah sulks. And it is some sulk! The twelve verses that we heard today elaborate the details of that great prophetic strop; even at the end of the book we are unclear if it has ended. God has the last word, but we cannot tell if Jonah has accepted it.

And yet this book and its prophet are justly famous – and rightly recorded in our wonderful window. What we encounter in both the book and the window is mercy: the mercy of God, whose property is always to have mercy. The poet, Robert Frost, saw this. In A Masque of Mercy, he addresses Jonah and says:

That book of yours in the Old Testament
Is the first place in literature, I think,
Where Mercy is explicitly the subject.
I say you should be proud of having beaten
The Gospels to it.

Jonah’s reluctance to accept that mercy makes the message of his book all the more powerful. The book of Jonah is wonderfully honest: of all the qualities of God, mercy is perhaps the hardest for us to conceive. The judgement of God, the justice of God, even the love of God, these we can apprehend, if not always accept. But the mercy of God catches us by surprise. The repetitions of the kyrie eleison in the eucharist – Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy – these, I suspect, are for God’s benefit, but for ours: Lord, help us to embrace the mercy with which you embrace us.
The famous image of the sculptor at work is apt here: ‘The sculptor does not make the statue. He removes what hid it’. The fifth century theologian, Pseudo-Dionysius, deploys this image in his Mystical Theology:

We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by the act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden. (Mystical Theology, Ch.2)

Here the simile to describe our prayer to God, but I wonder if it is even better as an image of the way God’s revelation works on us: God’s revelation chips away at Jonah, chips away at us, releasing with infinite care and skill what is hidden within us.

‘Revelation has nothing to do with absolute knowledge’, says Rowan Williams. To say this is not to make revelation any less authoritative (On Christian Theology, pp.131-147). Again in the words of Rowan Williams, revelation expresses ‘the sense of an initiative that does not lie with us’, drawing us almost teasingly into a fuller understanding of God’s will for us and the world.

In Jewish communities the book of Jonah in its entirety, is read aloud on the feast of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. And in the Reform Synagogues of Britain a wonderful prayer is read at the conclusion of worship, a prayer that commits us, unmerciful and imperfect as we are, to be agents of God’s mercy and God’s revelation:

Lord, you are revealed in the story of Jonah, and we relate its meaning to ourselves; for Nineveh is the repentant world, and we are Israel, its unwilling prophet. You have chosen us to know You and to love You, and this knowledge is too wonderful for us. By it you reveal our kinship to friend and foe, our duty to those who love us, and to those who hate us; our task in a world where everything and everyone is Your work. If we are not for others, we are not for Israel. It is for us to bring the prisoner freedom, to give the homeless refuge, and the starving food. It is for us to sow the seed of friendship on unfriendly soil, to reconcile enemies, and bring redemption to our oppressors… Your command is beyond all calculation.

God of mercy, God of grace,
Show the brightness of Thy face;
Shine upon us, Saviour, shine,
Fill Thy Church with light divine,
And Thy saving health extend,
Unto earth’s remotest end.
Amen.