



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

6 September 2020: Matins Sermon

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Jonah 3:10–4:11, Revelation 8:1–5

The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity

'The Work of Grace'

These are strange times. Times when we are experiencing the familiar, but differently. Like this sermon, normally delivered with me standing high above you as the congregation in the Cathedral's Jacobean pulpit. Only now, I speak it into a machine, facing a screen, and a little recorder pulses as my voice rises, falls, quickens, slows, pauses. I am speaking only to imagined listeners who might be in Oxford or Bangkok, in a sitting room or on a boat passing slowly down a river in Norfolk. This speaking and this listening are acts, then, of the imagination. At this point in time, no one is listening but myself, hearing my own words in a study looking out over the green lawns of Tom Quad, a pale, autumnal sunlight making even the stone walls seem honeyed and on the point of liquifying. And you, who I don't see and may be even don't know - you receive this as more audio pulses transmitted through invisible air waves, picked up on your mobile or laptop. And though we may have met, we may never meet and remain threaded now by my single voice. I hear nothing of your voice. And somehow this situation intensifies what even the easing of lockdown has worked upon and within us: this withdrawal to another level, beneath the social where people are locked into various isolations and solitudes – alone with their own thoughts. My words melt into your minds, as they might on a radio when you listen to a story at bedtime. My thinking weaves its way into your thinking, my imagination reaches out and into your imagination, so that consciousness slips into dreaming and all sorts of figures are conjured and vaporize.

And, I think, that's a good place to be to hear about God – in that twilight zone between the real and the imagined, the auditory and the invisible. It's a good place to be for contemplating the Scriptures set down for this morning's Matins. For they are Scriptures that speak of things divine and visionary experiences of events in heaven; whatever heaven is. There's that strange final episode in the *Book of Jonah* about a deep anger in the prophet that flowers into a vine that is then consumed. And the voice of God over the city of Nineveh that speaks of mercy towards the inhabitants and their cattle, but then adds, weirdly, that "they cannot discern between their right

hand and their left hand.” What does this mean? What does this divine act of mercy mean? There is something here. We sense it. But we cannot grasp it. We can only grasp Jonah’s solitude, sitting in a place above and outside the city, and the anger that burns within him that God has drawn his attention to. An anger, perhaps, at a depth unknown to himself. An anger that profoundly embitters. The end of the book is as if Jonah’s prophetic work at Nineveh has only just begun. Why else would God tell him about the people’s lack of discernment, and their need then to be taught? As if: before his true prophetic calling can come into being, then dark things in Jonah himself (his fear of the demands of his calling, his anger when those fears are realised and he feels humiliated for being right) - before his true prophetic calling can come into being there is a work within him that needs to be done. His three days in the belly of the whale is only the first stage in his own redemption. Deep is calling on to deep, and Jonah is realising his life is caught up in these providential movements of God he neither understands nor is able to control. God will be God – whatever we understand or fail to understand.

And then there’s that dark, apocalyptic passage from the *Book of Revelation* – the opening of the seventh seal. An event so awesome, so terrifying, it is said that there was silence in heaven, adding, almost comically, for about half an hour. For can there be any notion of time in realms that are eternal? The time is John’s; his created sense of time. But we cannot conceive what eternity is or what heaven is. We are limited by the words we have and the imaginations we can employ – all of which can speak only of the things we know; not of divine realms. John writes what he witnesses, but continually we are drawn towards the edges of what can be thought and spoken of. “I saw seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets. And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God out of the angel’s hands.” What does all this mean? Of course, there is symbolism – the number seven, for example – but we are imaginatively pulled beyond the symbolism to an action (which we and our prayers are a part of); an action which is incomprehensible – the sacrifice of our prayers on the altar before God. We have to accustom ourselves to the incomprehensible. Faith is a long walk into the incomprehensible – trusting always, groping to understand always. We fall into the hands of God and that can lead us anywhere. Discerning always, trying to make judgements always, getting it wrong, but somehow, in persisting, getting it wrong is all part of the process of following. We let go of the familiar, and we embrace modes of living and experiencing that takes us far beyond the normal. The normal is safe; but here is another kind of normal.

It is easier now, perhaps, to venture into what has to be imagined because it is not available to human rationalising processes; it is easier now, perhaps, when we are dislodged from the familiar. As when I speak into a machine, hearing only my own voice; and you listen to that disembodied voice speaking from somewhere you maybe can't locate – a place you have to imagine. But, hopefully, something is communicated that transcends the words themselves though needs the words to lead both you and I to that place: a place of prayer and contemplation ascending before God like the prayers and contemplations of the all saints in the burning incense on the golden altar. God is working here, as God was working with Jonah, opening up deep spaces within us for new receptions of grace.