

### **Third Sunday of the Epiphany: Outrageous Forgiveness**

Religion is an essentially practical matter, strongly influenced by religious and cultural authority (the root of the word is *religio*, sticking to the rules). In First Testament times, the rules of social justice assumed that convicted wrong-doers had to be punished. So, Jonah expected that God would carry out his threat to destroy Nineveh. Jonah had risked his life to take God's threat to the wicked city, and was astonished and angry when God changed his mind.

We and all generations of our human and pre-human ancestors are adapted to live in a society governed largely by a long evolutionary background. We don't need to look far to see why unconscious human nature is at least partly explicable by it. Social scrutiny has always closely monitored our ideas of natural justice, ensuring the fair exchange of favours, and appropriate retribution for offenders. Like Jonah, many of us would agree that the worst sinners should get what they deserve.

To us, God's gift of free forgiveness is very difficult to grasp. Unmerited grace is fundamentally counter-intuitive, because, from long human experience, we say 'It can't be that easy'. So, we can all too easily understand Jonah's frustration, and why many people in the secular post-Christian world identify more with the prodigal son's older brother than with the prodigal himself, or more with the labourers who had worked in the vineyard since dawn than with those who came late but got the same wage.

The authors of Jonah and of the Gospels told their stories to convey a deep theological truth about the unconditional, no-strings love and forgiveness offered by God to people in all and any condition. The idea that such a priceless gift could be offered for free sounded outrageous and even offensive to Jonah and the other practical, common-sense, religious people that first heard Jesus' preaching. Most of Paul's epistles are about trying to persuade his converts to abandon trying to keep the Law and accept God's gift of life for nothing.

Yet, just as cooks do not need to understand chemistry in order to produce a good dinner, a Christian believer does not need to understand any of the various theories of atonement in order to find peace and forgiveness in the sacrament of penance. Sadly, people today still insist on keeping scores, despite centuries of Christian teaching. Only Christian faith and love make unconditional forgiveness possible.

*Kim King*