

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

20 September 2026

Sentence

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By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. Ephesians 2.8–9

Prayer of the Day

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Loving and righteous God,
your boundless generosity exceeds all that we can desire or deserve,
and you give to the last worker all you promised to the first:
liberate us from all jealousy and greed,
that we may be free to love and serve others,
and in your service may find our true reward;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reading from the Old Testament or as Appointed

Jonah 3.10-4.11

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. ¹ But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord, 'Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.' ⁴ But the Lord replied, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' ⁵ Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, 'It would be better for me to die than to live.' ⁹ But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?' 'It is,' he said. 'And I'm so angry I wish I were dead.' ¹⁰ But the Lord said, 'You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and also many animals?'

End of the reading

Hear the word of the Lord,

Silence may follow each reading.

Psalm

Psalm 145.1-8

¹ I will exalt you, O God my king:

I will bless your name for ever and ever.

² Every day will I bless you:

and praise your name for ever and ever.

³ Great is the Lord, and wonderfully worthy to be praised:

his greatness is past searching out.

⁴ One generation shall praise your works to another:

and declare your mighty acts.

⁵ As for me, I will be talking

of the glorious splendour of your majesty:

I will tell the story of your marvellous works.

⁶ All people shall speak of the power of your terrible deeds:

and I will proclaim your greatness.

⁷ Their lips shall flow with the remembrance

of your abundant goodness:

they shall shout for joy at your righteousness.

⁸ The Lord is gracious and compassionate:

slow to anger and of great goodness.

New Testament Reading

Philippians 1.21-30

²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. ²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

End of the reading

Hear the word of the Lord,

Gospel Reading

Matthew 20.1-16

¹ 'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ 'About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." ⁵ So they went. 'He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" ⁷ "Because no one has hired us," they answered. 'He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard." ⁸ 'When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first." ⁹ 'The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² "These who were hired last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." ¹³ 'But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" ¹⁶ 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

Sermon: The Challenges and Freedom of Grace

What do you think is the hardest part of being a Christian?

If we stop to pause, it's quite a challenging question. While conducting research for this sermon I came across a range of answers. One article said being a Christian is hard because it requires self-growth. Christianity is hard because it aims to soften hearts said another. Other answers suggested the hardest part of following Christ was, in no particular order:

- self-denial;
- walking by faith not sight;
- loving and forgiving others; and
- having the patience to wait for God to act in accordance to His timeline, not ours.

One article even proposed that the hardest part about being a Christian was relating to other Christians, and while we might initially laugh at that, sadly, if we are honest, we can also all probably recognise some truth in it too. In fact, it's something I will come back to a bit later.

The good news is that, unlike all these differing opinions, the hardest part of being a Christian is shown clearly in this, the Bible, and in our readings today. The even better news is that the hardest part of being a Christian is also *the best* part of being a Christian! God's love for us is so great that the magnitude of our challenges as Christians is more than equalled by the rewards He promises in return. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

First the hard part.

I'll be honest, I tend to feel sorry for Jonah. We've all been asked to do things we don't want to do and done them anyway. But sometimes I think it's a little too easy for us to sit back and judge Jonah's reticence to go to Ninevah. The biggest city in the known world at the time, Ninevah was the capital of the Assyrian empire, an empire feared throughout the near east for the severity of its brutality. It impaled its enemies on stakes, flayed the skin off and mutilated captured soldiers, and forced entire nations into exile.

And if that was not enough, then they captured these acts in stone murals that adorned the walls of their palace. In an era marked by its brutality, the Assyrians not only took it to the next level but they celebrated it, they wanted to be known for it. God asked Jonah not only to go to the centre of this ruthless regime, but to ask them to repent so that *they* could be saved. And, partly because of Jonah, they were saved.

So to our passage today. What must have been going through Jonah's mind? He's hot, a long way from home, being smashed by the sun and the wind and the plant giving him shade has sprung up and then promptly died. He can be forgiven for feeling pretty miserable. There's little doubt he's also suffering mixed feelings for playing a pivotal role in the salvation of a brutal regime that has caused so much suffering in Israel.

It's probably impossible for us to understand the magnitude of what he had been asked to do. While I am cautious about the risk of analogies introducing relativism into sermons, in this case, I think it might help us understand the enormity of Jonah's task. Imagine being a Polish Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1944 and being told by God that you are to go to Berlin and preach repentance to the Nazis so that they may be saved from destruction. Or a Cambodian

intellectual to the Khemer Rouge, or a Shia mother to ISIS. You get the point. To truly love our enemies, to the point that we actively seek their salvation, is hard. Really hard. Harder still is being willing to accept that God may bestow his grace on those we struggle to believe deserve it. For Jonah, this appears to have been such a painful concept to accept that he wished he was dead.

Which I think nicely illustrates the hardest part of being a Christian. It's not loving our enemies, as tough as that is. It's surrendering ourselves to the truth that it doesn't matter what *we* think of people, of whether *we* believe them to be deserving of salvation or not: God's grace is freely given to those God chooses to give it to.

This is beautifully shown in our Gospel reading today. It's important to note that the parable of the workers in the vineyard, which is unique to Matthew's Gospel, is immediately preceded by the story of the rich man who is aggrieved to be told to give up all his wealth and follow Jesus, and followed by the mother of James and John asking for them to be granted special privilege in heaven. As such, it fits into a narrative arc in which Christ challenges both strangers and his closest disciples to renounce earthly conceptions of status.

In the parable, the workers in the vineyard complain to the landowner about what they believe to be unfair payment of wages. They argue that those who have worked longest deserve more than those hired at the end of the day. Yet the landowner, who Matthew often uses as an analogy of God, rebukes them.

"I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you." ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

It's a powerful rebuke. As we look at these verses as 21st Century Christians, it is clear that it warns against false piety. It does not matter how long you have been a Christian, whether you are a published theologian scholar, a revered saint or an archbishop, someone who has examined every word of the bible, or a poor beggar praying for enough food and shelter to survive one more winter night on the streets. The reward for faith is the same: salvation through God's grace, freely given, to those who truly repent of their sins – like the inhabitants of Ninevah in the book of Jonah. We are no more special than the next Christian, nor can we do anything to elevate ourselves above other Christians by good works, praying harder, reading the bible more often or fasting on feast days. This is when relating to other Christians, who sometimes can fall into the trap of seeing themselves as being 'better Christians than others, can be tough!

It is tempting at this point to say that *all* Christians are equally deserving of salvation. It would certainly fit with the social expectations of equality that most 21st Century Australians subscribe to. Yet the truth is the opposite. The truth is that if we are all equally *undeserving* of salvation.

None of us are free from sin. None of us have earned the right to eternal life. We are utterly helpless to influence the giving of God's grace upon us– and in a world and a society that largely focuses on the empowerment of self, being able to accept that helplessness is arguably the hardest part of being a Christian. We need to accept that we are all absolutely powerless when it comes to grace.

Which is also the *best* part of being a Christian! For once we accept that we are at the mercy of God's grace, that has been freely given through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, then we are free to praise God, to marvel at His good works and to turn our backs on the trappings of earthly power – such as wealth or status. As Paul encourages us in his letter to the Philippians, it frees us to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; standing firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.

Our dependence on a grace we do not deserve frees us from the false belief that we might be gatekeepers of the Christian faith. It is not for us to decide who is, or is not, worthy to be deemed a Christian. In John, Chapter 10, verse 9 Jesus clearly states: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me shall be saved".

The humility required to surrender ourselves to the truth that our salvation lies solely in the grace of God, which through Christ's fulfilment of the law is amplified so that we have received grace upon grace, is not easy. Yet, if embraced, it should be as comforting as it is humbling. Christ calls us as Christians to serve our fellow humans, not judge them. To lift up the faithful, not find ways to elevate ourselves. To open people's eyes to Christ's gateway to salvation, not act as bouncers, determining who we believe is Christian enough to come in.

If we can tackle the hardest aspect of being a Christian - if we can accept God's sovereignty over all things, even when we don't understand or even agree, and acknowledge that God's grace is a gift, freely given to who God chooses - then not only will we be freed from the trappings of this sinful world, but we will be able to proclaim the good news of the Gospel to the ends of the earth with pure, untroubled hearts. What better part of being a Christian is there than this?