

10am Parish Communion on Sunday 20 September 202

Matt 20:1-16, Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Phil 1:21-30: *Must God be fair?*

Last week somebody said to me *“I’ve noticed how much people in the UK will say “that’s not fair”; why do you think that is?”*

And I thought: what an interesting question. Here in the UK we say “that’s not fair”, when we think that somebody’s being treated unjustly. We might also say “that’s not fair” when we think what somebody’s said is being misrepresented. When we’re thinking about justice, and about truth, people have a strong sense of what is right and what is wrong.

This Sunday, we are in the middle of Creationtide, which is the time when the Anglican Church thinks about what the Anglican Church calls the 5th mark of mission: ***to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.*** But if we’re going to be serious about being good stewards of the world that God has created, we’re probably also going to have to think about how we take on the responsibility of managing the world’s resources in a way that treats people fairly. That takes us into the territory of the Anglican Church’s 4th mark of mission and leads us to thinking about ***transforming the unjust structures of society.***

I think whenever we ourselves are directly affected we are often very confident in our own assessment of what is not fair. And we can be very quick to call out behaviour that we think is not fair. And chief amongst our ideas of fairness is that there should be consistency, and predictability. We are sure that justice can’t be arbitrary.

But our gospel reading tells us that God does not necessarily agree with our ideas of what is fair.

And the story of Jonah unsettles our understanding that God is 100% reliable and dependable and unchanging. Because in the story of Jonah we heard ***“God changed his mind about the calamity ... he had said he would bring upon them”.***

Our readings tell us that what we think of as our world is not, in fact, our world. Rather, this is God’s world. The idea that God need not and does not obey what we think ought to be the

rules of our world contradicts our rational sensibilities, developed in the Age of Enlightenment.

If we are honest, we are perfectly happy with the idea of God being sovereign, but only if whatever God does in his sovereignty acts in accordance with our ideas of justice and fairness. We are not so happy with sovereignty that does not conform to our own ideas. The reality of God's sovereignty offends our post-modern conviction that we should be free to choose our identities, and free to shape our lives and our destinies. God's sovereignty is a real challenge to our human pride.

Yet if we can accept the sovereignty of God, there is still good news for us in today's readings. Because they tell us that God is compassionate, going out repeatedly to look for and to help people who cannot help themselves: sending Jonah to the people of Nineveh, ***"that great city [of] wickedness"***, to warn them that if they did not mend their ways their city would be overthrown.

In the kingdom of heaven, the landowner goes out, again and again, to the people who've turned up so late to the market-place that there's no work for them. In the kingdom of heaven the landowner ***"[chooses] to give to the labourers who arrive last the same as [he gives] to [those who arrived first]"***, paying the daily wage to all the labourers in his vineyard, irrespective of when they start work.

Is this to encourage us that it does not matter to God whether we come to the party early or late?

To reassure us that whether we have much to offer within God's economy, or fear we can do little in his service, is entirely immaterial to him?

But the story is as much about what God *says*, as it is about what he *does*. When the first people to turn up to work complain, because they don't receive any more than the ones who turned up late, the landowner tells them ***"I choose to give [the] last the same as I give to you"***. He calls them out for being ***"envious because I am generous"***, asking them if he

chooses to pay the usual daily wage to those who do not deserve it, is he not allowed ***“to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”***

The landowner is adamant that he must be free to be generous. This is a story about the extent of God’s grace. It is grace, and compassion, and love, that sends the landowner out, again and again, to invite those standing idle in the market place to go into the vineyard.

To reinforce quite how revolutionary this behaviour is, let me tell you about the working practice - the ***call-on*** - that operated in the London Docks for generations.

In an interview for an oral history project in 2018, Len Dawes, a docker, told how you needed a family member already working in one of the gangs to have even a chance of getting work – as he did with his father and four of his father’s brothers.

Len told how, ***“at a quarter to eight ... the foreman would call the men out”***. Len explained that the foreman had a brutally efficient method of selecting only the toughest men. Len described how ***“the foreman would throw brass tickets into the waiting crowd and watch the men scramble and fight to pick them up ... those who missed out would have to wait until next time”***. It sounds like something from another century, doesn’t it? But this was still happening in the London docks in the 1940’s.

Let’s contrast that working practice with our gospel reading, and with the landowner who ***“[went out about nine o’clock [and] he saw others standing idle in the market place.***

He went out again about noon.

And about three o’clock, he did the same.

And at about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around....”

It is surely grace, and compassion, and love, that stirs the landowner to pay those would-be workers who missed the early-morning call, and who are just standing around, far more than they would be entitled to expect.

We encounter that same compassion and generous love when we hear that ***“God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon [the people of Nineveh] and he did not do it.”***

This is the love that God is so keen for Jonah to understand.

This is love for people who have done nothing to deserve it, people who are so clueless about God’s love for them that, like the people of Nineveh, they ***“do not know their right hand from their left”***.

This is love that Jonah could only begin to understand after he is shown what it feels like to lose what has made him very happy. Love and loss that he would only have felt even more deeply, had he lost what he had grown and laboured over.

It is that same compassion and generous love that took Jesus to the cross, to reconcile to God all of us who realise that we *need* Jesus.

Those who show up *early* for work...

... and those who don’t.

Those who are surprised to receive *more than they expected* ...

...and those who grumble about the generosity shown to others.

Those who are constantly anxious about whether they *are* loved by God ...

... and those who *struggle* to jettison the world’s measuring scales and values.

Because as long as we have breath in our bodies, it is never too late.

Never too late to take up the offer to come into God’s kingdom.

Never too late to experience God’s lavishly generous love.

Never too late to seek to share that love with others.