

It's not fair!*Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16*

I suspect there will not be a person here in Church this morning, or watching on-line, who has not said or thought at some point in their lives, 'It's not fair!' The child not getting their choice of meal or weekend outing. The child not getting something that 'everyone else has', or gets to do. The adult who works harder than others, and has to pick up the slack when colleagues don't perform well. The person who has worked long hours and is passed over for a pay rise or promotion. The person unhappy about someone else's repeated good luck. The person staying quiet when someone else is credited with what you've done.

It's not fair when people are unable to afford the basics (food, energy, housing, childcare). It's not fair when success in life owes more to luck (such as whether you're born into a wealthy family) than to effort. It's not fair when hard work no longer guarantees a decent standard of living, as many jobs are poorly paid or insecure. It's not fair when public services are crumbling while the wealthy aren't paying their fair share of tax. It's not fair when some people play by a completely different set of rules, due in part to the influence of money on politics,

There's a further dark side to 'it's not fair.' The person who has been fit and active all their life being struck down with some mobility-limiting illness. The person discriminated against because of age, gender, life-style choice, ethnicity. The person caught up in a crime incident because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The person who has never smoked being diagnosed with cancer. The unexplained death of a child. The slaughter of the Holocaust, killing millions of Jews, Poles, gypsies, homosexuals, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, people with disability in World

War Two. The ethnic cleansing being perpetrated against the Palestinians. The victims of the global climate change catastrophe affecting poorer countries disproportionately. It's not fair.

It's not fair that I have been singled out. It's not fair that I should have to put up with this. It's not fair that I should suffer. It's not fair when there is no reason or explanation or justice. It's not fair when God doesn't behave in the way I expect God to behave or do the things I want God to do.

"Quarrelling with God is a time-honoured biblical practice: Moses, Job, David and Peter were all masters at it. So also the prophet Jonah. Jonah is quarrelling because he has been surprised by grace...His idea of what God is supposed to do and what God in fact does differs radically. Jonah sulks. Jonah is angry. The word *anger* occurs frequently." In what is best understood as a comic and satirical parable, Jonah had been sent by God to the city of Nineveh to warn it of its imminent destruction. Jonah runs away from God, gets swallowed by a whale (it's a parable, remember). Jonah is set free, then decides to go to Nineveh and preach its doom and disaster. To his amazement, and displeasure, what he preaches is heard by the people of the city, and they repent their broken ways and God changes His mind, and the people are saved.

Incandescent, Jonah walks away and throws himself down outside the city in a sulk, building a booth to protect him from the sun. It's not fair. God miraculously grows a bush over Jonah to provide more shade. But God let the bush die, and the sun beat down on Jonah, and a sultry east wind blew, and Jonah wished he could die. It's not fair!

Jonah is a believer. Jonah eventually did what God wanted. Jonah can even say that he knew that God was, "*gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...*" There was nothing wrong with Jonah's theology and his knowledge of God. "But he was unpractised in God's ways...He has a failure of imagination, a failure of heart. He had no idea what God was doing, the largeness of His love and mercy and salvation...He interpreted everything through his Jonah ideas, his Jonah

desires.”ⁱ Jonah may have had a pointing finger towards the people of Nineveh and their sin - they needed it to be pointed out. But he did not have God’s idea of destiny and grace, a huge sweeping gesture with the dimensions of boundless mercy and love. Jonah assumed the he knew exactly what God would do. When God didn’t do it, Jonah was displeased, he was burned up with anger. In the end, though Jonah had preached to the people of Nineveh and warned them of the consequences of their actions, it was the people of Nineveh who turned away from their evil ways and changed God’s mind for destruction to a mind for mercy. They preached to Jonah showing him what his words about God looked like. Here is the God Who is, *“gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...”* God’s grace is for all people; God’s forgiveness is for all people; God’s mercy is for all people; God’s love is for all people. And all means all, for God.

This parable of Jonah is about God, and what God purposes to do and to be. In the new covenant promised in Jeremiah. In the life and the sacrifice and the endless love of Jesus the Christ. Whether Jonah thinks people should be forgiven or not. Whether we think people should be forgiven or not. God will be God, and His love bends towards mercy for all who repent.

You don’t have to stand in a pulpit or at a lectern to point your index finger to suggest that the people you know, or the people you read about in the news, should tidy up their morality and embellish their piety and get their facts straight. “God is waving His windmill Jesus arms, calling all of us to grace and mercy and salvation.”ⁱⁱ In the Jonah parable God has pity on the great city, and the tens of thousands who live there. He even has pity on the many cattle. God’s mercy extends to all Creation, even when we are casual or callous or cruel toward it. For God is *“gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...”*

Jesus’ parable about the grumbling vineyard workers is in a similar vein. People come in to work at the vineyard at different times. Some bear the, *“burden of the day and the scorching heat.”*

Some start at the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour. Some eventually get there in the eleventh hour. Everyone, says the householder (who stands for God), will get paid the same, however long they have worked. It's not fair, some cry out. But who is it to begrudge God's generosity? Better late than never, says God. However late, they came to Me. They came to work. They changed their ways. I will treat everyone with exactly the same grace and generosity and love. Are you jealous because I am good? Is your eye evil because I am good. Looking around with an evil eye is to be motivated by jealousy and a spirit of judgementalism, both of which are death to being a redeemed person in God's Kingdom.ⁱⁱⁱ Our problem, so often, is that we have made our God too small, when in fact, our God is too big for our imagination. But it's not fair! To whom?

When it boils down to it, wouldn't it be better to let God get on with being God and forgiving anyone, *anyone*, if they turn away from their sin and their failings and their bad ways, in the hope that there will be, for every one of us, more than enough mercy and kindness and love and forgiveness and grace to forgive *us*. For every little rotten thing we've ever done, alongside some of the whopping bad things that may have been part of our life's history?

In the end, it's not our standards by which the world will be judged, it will be God's. In the end it's not our grudging generosity and limited grace that will save the world; it will be God's limitless love that will save.

This is a hard lesson, but one we do well to heed. "Does not our personal resentment of the extremely loving nature of God always involve a proud lack of awareness about how God pursues each one of us, even as we complain about the generosity of God for others. How sad it is if those who have not been introduced to God's love act more compassionately than those who know that *"God is gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love..."*

We are too close to ourselves, too wrapped in our own skins, too bundled in our own terrible needs, to see truly what God gives to us. It's not our due, we haven't earned it. Just as those we envy and judge haven't earned it. All are beloved of God.

But it's not fair!

Actually, it *is* fair. However much mercy is needed, however much salvation is needed, however much love is needed, however much blessing is needed, it is fair enough. Because it is God's and touches and embraces and saves every single one of us when we turn to Him. Oh, and the cattle too!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, pps160-161

ⁱⁱ *Ibid* p161

ⁱⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, 'But I say to you', p250