

Unfair

The story of Jonah is well-known. Or at least the first part of the story – the first three chapters of the book of Jonah is well known.

God, you might recall, told Jonah, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” (Jonah 1:2)

Jonah thought that this was not a great idea, so he fled and boarded a ship bound for Tarshish.

God sent a storm that threatened to sink the ship. The crew cast lots to discover the culprit, and when the lot fell to Jonah, he admitted that he was fleeing from God and that they should throw him overboard to sooth God’s wrath (1:12). The sailors didn’t want to, but they were desperate, so sure enough, Jonah was thrown into the sea. The sailors did so, and the storm abated (1:15). But God sent a great fish (sometimes thought to be a whale) to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (1:17)

Chapter 2 is Jonah’s prayer of thanksgiving prayed from inside the fish. The prayer ends with him saying “...I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’” In response, the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (2:9-10)

Chapter 3 opens with God telling Jonah (again) to go to Nineveh “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” (3:1). This time, Jonah obeys, and preaches the message that God had given him. Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

Jonah’s preaching worked: The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. (3:5) The king of Nineveh responded by issuing a royal decree requiring penitence—hoping that if Nineveh repented God would relent.

Our lectionary reading today picks up at that point, with God changing his mind about destroying Nineveh (3:10). 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.

This is one of those instances in the bible that people have often argued about. God relented. God ‘changed his mind’. After all, in the book of Malachi 3:6, God says “I the Lord do not change.” And Isaiah 40:8 tells us, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” And so on.

It’s a relief to me that God responded to the Ninevites action. God sent Jonah to Ninevah for a purpose – God clearly wanted the people to respond to his warning. God

could, of course, just have smited (smote?) the city of Ninevah without the hassle of Jonah and the fish and everything, if he didn't want to give them the chance to change the outcome.

We shouldn't worry about God changing his mind – we should be recognising this as God's character of being loving and gracious not changing. It is not a story about God's wrath, instead, it's a story about God's grace.

In fact, the story of Ninevah is reflected in the story of Jonah – Jonah disobeyed God and found himself facing a terrible fate, but God gave him another chance, just as he would give Ninevah another chance.

When God saw what [the people of Ninevah] did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

...and everyone lived happily ever after. Or at least that's what the Sunday School edit of the story of Jonah tells us.

But Jonah was not happy – and we heard about his unhappiness – and God's response – as we move into chapter 4.

But to Jonah God sparing Ninevah seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to God, "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. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah is not happy to see God's mercy applied to these Ninevites. He wanted to see God's wrath poured out on the Ninevites. He wanted to see them destroyed. That's why God had sent him there, wasn't it? To tell them about the coming destruction?

Jonah saw that the people of Nineveh had been evil, and he wanted God to punish them. That would be fair. Not destroying them and their city was just not fair.

We would never think God's grace was unfair, would we?

It's easy to see a similarity in Jonah's reaction to the reaction of the elder brother to the younger brother's return in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). Both Jonah and the elder son saw God/the father being gracious and generous and resented it. Both were angry – and neither realised the grace they had already received.

In response to Jonah's anger, God asked simply, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Instead of answering, Jonah went off and sulked. He sat down outside the city, and watched. I can imagine him going over everything and how unfair it was in his mind. I've been there – and I'm sure we all have been there from time to time. Full of self-

righteousness we tell ourselves how unfairly we've been treated and what should have happened. "It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair!"

The Ninevites had changed, but Jonah hadn't. He didn't accept what God wanted from him back in chapter 1, and he still didn't accept what God wanted from him in chapter 4. He prayed, "Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Seriously? "It is better for me to die than to live"? I get that he was angry with what God had done (or not done). But why does he think it would be better to die at this point? Because he doesn't want to live to see the Ninevites prospering?

And so Jonah sulked.

And again, God seemed to show his grace to Jonah. ...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. (4:6) Just as God had provided a great fish to save Jonah in the sea, now God provided a leafy plant to shield him from the sun.

Jonah was very happy about the plant. Just as he'd been very happy about the fish. But he wasn't happy about the Ninevites repenting. He wasn't happy about God showing his grace to the Ninevites. The only times that Jonah had been happy were those times when God had done something good for Jonah.

But God's lesson for Jonah wasn't complete yet.

[Because] at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. 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." (4:7-8)

Jonah wanted God to destroy Nineveh, but God instead destroyed the plant that he had provided to give Jonah shade. As we are reminded in the book of Job (1:21) "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away."

God then challenged Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

Oh yes, said Jonah, and again wished he was dead.

And then our reading ended, which is also the end of the book of Jonah, with this compassionate outpouring from God:

"You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 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?" (4:10-11)

God began by reminding Jonah that the source of his anger and his death wish was the death of the plant that had shaded him. For a short time, that plant had been dear to Jonah – he'd benefitted from its shade. It was his one consolation in the face of God failing to destroy Ninevah. We can see that Jonah's perception of the proportions of these things is all wrong, but I think we can all understand them – if not relate to them ourselves.

Jonah hadn't planted the bush, and he hadn't nurtured it. But it had been given to Jonah by God. Its shade was a gift of God, for his sulking, angry and self-righteous prophet.

And then God compares Jonah's selfish concern for the plant with God's own concern for the people – and the animals – of Ninevah.

God had been ready to destroy them if they didn't turn from their wickedness. But he sent Jonah to Ninevah to deliver a message to them – which, if they listened and responded to it, would save them. Sure enough, the people responded to the warning, and so God spared them. Jonah might have been angry, he might have thought it was all unfair, but God effectively says to him, "You cared about the bush, I cared about the people of Ninevah. What don't you understand, Jonah?"

And that's how the book of Jonah ends. With a question for Jonah. How do you think he would have responded?

Again, it is like the parable of the Prodigal Son, where things are explained to the elder son, but Jesus doesn't tell us how that son responds.

In these things, do Jonah and the elder son see unfairness, or do they see God's grace in action? For that matter, do we see them as unfair, or do we see them as God's grace in action?

We see a similar story of the tension between fairness and grace in our gospel reading today, the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Jesus begins by saying "...the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard."

In the early morning the landowner recruited workers for the day – and he agreed to pay them a denarius, the usual daily wage.

During the day he returned to the marketplace several times to recruit more workers – at nine in the morning, at noon, at three in the afternoon, and then finally at five in the afternoon. He said we would pay them whatever was right.

And then, at knock off time, the landowner asked his foreman to call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last hired and then going to the first.

You'd think, perhaps, that you'd pay those who'd been there since early morning first, but no – the last get paid first – and amazingly, they get a whole denarius.

They would have been over the moon! After seeing that, you can imagine that each of the other workers would be doing some calculations... if those latecomers got a whole denarius, and they'd been working twice as long, two denarii would be expected and those who'd been there all day would expect so much more.

But no, says Jesus, the end of verse 10 tells us that each of them also received a single denarius.

Not fair.

The labourers weren't happy – we heard in verses 11 and 12 that when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, '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.'

It just doesn't make sense. It is not right. It is not fair.

But verse 13 and 14 explain the landowner's strange action: But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

His actions may not seem fair or sensible to us, but the landowner hadn't lied or misled or indeed underpaid anyone: Those who signed on first thing in the morning had said "Yes, we'll work for you for the whole day for a denarius", and that's what the landowner gave them.

It was the landowner's money to give.

And of course, we'd all agree that it's his money and he can do with it what he likes...

But we see it all the time in the world – people spending money in ways that we think are unwise – or on things that don't meet our approval.

The landowner asked those disgruntled workers "...are you envious because I am generous?"

But... but... it's unfair! Isn't it?

This parable isn't a story about industrial relations; it's a story of the kingdom of God. God is the landowner, and God will take you into his kingdom in the morning, or in the afternoon or late in the day. And the reward that God offers to each one of us through the death and resurrection of Jesus is the same. It is life with him. Everlasting life.

You get the same reward, no matter how long or how well you've worked. The one thing that matters, is being there at the end of the day. When the reward is given.

All the workers in the vineyard were paid the same. And that was no less than anyone had agreed or been promised. But only the workers in the vineyard were paid. If they'd never gone to the marketplace and accepted the landowner's offer and gone to the vineyard, there was no reward.

God's grace is not fair. There's that old saying that if it was fair, it wouldn't be grace.

It is unfair. But it is grace. And it is there for all of us, as surely as it was there for the people of Ninevah. But, like the people of Ninevah and like the workers in the vineyard, we need to respond to God's message to receive God's grace.

Amen