

SERMON 20th September 2026

May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts in all our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen

If I were to ask you to complete the sentence '*It's not fair that...*' I wonder what you might say. Would you speak of something that happened in a shop? Would it be something you saw on public transport? Would you cast your mind back to something that happened when you were younger, perhaps at school or at university or college? Or if you're into your sport would it be a dubious refereeing decision that cost your team an important win? I realise there are far more substantial endings to that sentence, but I will come back to that.

In the case of Jonah this morning I think he would definitely have made the plaintive cry of *it's not fair* in our first reading. First, a quick recap of how Jonah found himself sitting in a self-made booth and angry at God. Jonah had been asked by God to travel to the city of Nineveh, a city so wide it took 3 days to walk across it from one side to the other. Today, cities like Tokyo, Los Angeles and Perth in Australia are of a similar width. Once there, Jonah was to tell them to cease from their wicked ways, or in 40 days it would be overthrown. Jonah made his way with haste to the city of Tarshish, thousands of miles in the opposite direction. Like being asked to go from Edinburgh to Lerwick, but then heading to Malaga in Spain instead. Eventually, Jonah did go to Nineveh as he was asked to do so. Whilst I'm sure we can all relate to trying to getting out of something we're asked to do, I'll save that sermon for another day.

Our reading starts with stating how God was satisfied that the people of Nineveh had sufficiently changed their ways. Thus, changing his mind on the punishment he had threatened them with. As was pointed out in an online reflection I watched, most preachers and pastors would have been beyond thrilled at that kind of response to a warning- a lesson- they had delivered. But not Jonah. He was sitting- dare I say like a stropky teenager- bemoaning it was not fair that God had spared them such a punishment. This led to God asking Jonah '***Is it right for you to be angry?***' Jonah protested that he knew what God was like and that was why he had fled in the first place. Jonah was so caught up in himself and what might now happen to him, that he could only see God's actions as being unfair.

Actions being seen as unfair may well sum up how some of the labourers in the vineyard felt in our gospel reading today. Jesus tells the parable of the landowner who hires labourers for his vineyard. The landowner goes out early morning, recruits the first of the labourers, agrees that the work be done for a day's wage and off they go to work. As the day goes on more labourers are recruited to work the vineyard, and all are paid the same wage. So when the day ends and the manager hands out the wages, those who were recruited at 5 o'clock, were paid the same as those who had been working since early morning. Those first labourers pretty much said *it's not fair* that they were being paid the same as those who had arrived later. They felt that as they had been recruited first and had laboured the whole day, they should have been paid more. *It wasn't fair*.

But they, like Jonah, failed to see a bigger picture. The one that both God and Jesus were trying to show them. Their sense of unfairness was not balanced equally against a divine measurement of what *is* fair. In the case of Jonah, God-out of his love- did not want to punish the people of Nineveh. All 125 thousand of them. Jonah himself in his rant noted that God is ***merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love***. Those three traits-along with many others- were the reason God did not want to punish Nineveh. God wanted to give

them the chance to change their ways, to learn, to grow. God taught Jonah this lesson first hand. God appointed a bush over Jonah's head to give him shelter from the sun. When God later set a worm upon that bush, causing it to wither, Jonah again threw a tantrum. But this time, God rebuked him, pointing out that he had not laboured to produce it. God illustrated Jonah's concern to him, then citing how God shows a similar concern for the people of Nineveh. What God was really showing Jonah; was that *he cares for all*. God cared about the people of Nineveh, in the same way he cares about all who believe in and follow him today. We sing it in the hymn *God is love, his the care*, it was out of that care that God did not want to punish those who had strayed from his teaching.

I believe it is this same care that Jesus was speaking to in the case of the vineyard workers. I think the wages offered in the parable were symbols of God's love. A love that is for all, a love that includes everyone irrespective of *when* they come to faith. Much like there being a seat at the table for everyone. I think Jesus was pushing back against any sense people may have had, of hierarchy having a factor. And those who did would be held back to let others in before them. If those first workers in the vineyard saw that as being unfair, they too were not using the same measurements of fairness that Jesus used. The kingdom of heaven, God's unconditional love, the teachings of Jesus. They are for all who declare God as their saviour, regardless if that has been at a later stage in their lives or from when they were first born.

From Kings to politicians, to teachers, to street sweepers. The kingdom of Heaven is offered to all. With that, is a divine love and care for all.

I spent some time in autumn 2011 volunteering as an assistant primary school music teacher in Auckland NZ. In my last week there- the end of the school year for them- some of the pupils were in the assembly hall playing a game called *chariot racing*. In this game they had teams of three and a bedsheet. One pupil sat on the bedsheet placed on the floor and the other two *pulled the chariot* around a racetrack on the assembly hall floor. As the races went on and the excitement level of the pupils grew, some of the *spectators* kept on trying to interfere with the race. Several times I told them to stop, then started to say if you keep on doing this one of you is *going in the sin bin*. I did not want to, but eventually I had to put one of them in the sin bin. Think of a time when you've had to do something similar. Reluctant as you might have been, you had to introduce the possibility of a consequence for someone's actions. If that person-or persons- changed their conduct accordingly, would it then have been fair to punish them anyway? I think that is the point Jonah was missing earlier on. That God did not want to bring great harm, bring consequences, but he believed he had to at least speak of them. I like to think for both Jonah and the vineyard workers, their sense of *unfairness* was cancelled out. Once they had stopped to realise and see the bigger picture both God and Jesus were showing.

So what can we take from this? I said earlier about there being far more consequential endings to the sentence '*it's not fair that*'. For some, they may cite the growing equality gap within society. That the gap between rich and poor seems to be getting wider. Some might cite global warming, noting how less well-off countries seem to be bearing much of the cost of the actions of others many miles away from them. Closer to home some might cite the indiscriminate way that cancer affects people, especially children. In some instances, I think the only thing we can do is stand with people and say they are right, that it is not fair. I'm sure you can all come up with your own instances of that. But what we can do, is be fair in how we carry ourselves as children of God. By showing up in the lives of all we encounter as lanterns of his love. As an ambassador of God. It does not have to be in great big acts, although if you wish to undertake those I'm sure many would support you. It

can be in small acts, that add up to make a big difference. Small acts of kindness, of generous spirit, of warmth and compassion to those we meet. There will be moments when you think things are unfair, but that will be because you care. As I once heard it said *the things we complain about the most, are the things we care about the most*. God loves and cares for all, as does Jesus. Whether people come to faith early in the morning, or late in the evening of their lives.

God's love and his mercy, are open and offered to all.