

Sermon Jonah 3:11 – end of 4, Matthew 20: 1-16

‘It’s not fair!’

‘It’s not fair!’. How often have we heard or shouted that ourselves? ‘I don’t want to!’. Both today’s Old Testament and Gospel readings seem to home in on us at our worst. Humans being human.

Jonah goes to great lengths to avoid doing what God wants, although his ruse is soon scuppered and instead of sailing away out of reach, he finds himself back where he didn’t want to be heading for Nineveh. And not without a big scare on the way. Things don’t get much better when he is there and we find an angry Jonah trying to shelter from the sun. The gourd that is sheltering him dies and Jonah sits seething in his misery. ‘Have you reason to be angry?’ God asks.

In the Matthew reading we have heard about vineyard workers who were all paid the same, no matter how many hours they have worked. No-one was paid less than promised but some did less work for their money. When the early arrivals complained the landowner explained that they had no cause to complain, he had fulfilled his agreement with them, it was his money. Had they reason to be angry?

Jonah and the vineyard workers feel justified in their anger, in what they see as their personal loss but what if the stories are not quite so simple.

There is history between the people of Nineveh and Israel. I’ll pause to suggest that it might be similar to the friction between Normans and Anglo-Saxons which we have seen illustrated by the Bayeux Tapestry. So Jonah feels comfortable when God is going to destroy the Ninevehites, which to his mind they deserve, but he is not happy when God retracts his threat. Somehow God changing his mind becomes a personal insult to Jonah, rather than a matter between God and the people of Nineveh.

There is something in the story of the vineyard workers that seems not quite obvious. Why were the workers who were hired later in the day not waiting to be hired right from the start? Did they perhaps start work in the morning for someone else, but it didn’t work out? Did they struggle to get out of bed? Either way they sound like people who needed and were given a second chance at paid work.

We have seen envy. We have seen jealousy. We see people so focused on their own feelings and perception of their rights that they have lost sight of the bigger picture. In this case the fate of the whole population of the city, and the ability of local people to earn a living wage. That seems scarily like things we could read in modern newspapers or on social media.

It isn’t necessary to sit under a shrivelled-up gourd or watch others being paid more than us. There are so many things within our lives that cause us to shout ‘Foul’ on a regular basis, when what we are really thinking is that others are benefitting more than

us. When our new Chancellor of the Exchequer sets out his budget in a few weeks time, it will be the strong minded person who does not begin by assessing the impact it has on their own circumstances before they consider how it may impact others. To do that is human. It is when we stop there and think only of ourselves that it is negative.

We were reminded at our eco service last week that everything comes from God. Everything comes from God, not just the natural world but also the benefits and bounty that flow directly and indirectly from that world to us. It was God who caused Jonah's gourd to grow and to die, and God who paid the wages to the vineyard workers. He acted as he chose to with the things in his control. Had they reason to be angry?

God chose to give second chances to the people of Nineveh and the workers who were not ready for hire first thing in the morning. We are all given second chances all the time. Just as with those Ninevehens where God was so delighted that they had changed their ways that he did not destroy them, so with us God wants us, all of us, to be part of his kingdom and when we fail he is sad and wants us to try again. He will return to the marketplace a second, a third, infinite times in the hope that we will be there and ready to do his work.

When I think of second chances I have an image of the courtyard of the Narnian castle of the white witch. It is full of figures of animals and people turned to stone by her anger and hatred. But Aslan, the lion who was willing to die for them, arrives and breathes on each stone creature individually. As he does life returns and they each have the opportunity to return to their old lives, or to better than their own lives. They know who it is that has saved them from their stone selves, and they are ready to support his new kingdom.

That is the contrast between our human selves, jealous, envious and angry, and God. God, whose generosity stems from his love for us. Who is willing to be patient, to persevere until such time as we stop running away, and accept what he would like us to do. Our loving God who breathes his love onto us and waits for us to show our love for him in return. We have no reason to be angry.