

'Do not call God just.'

Proper 20 Year A. Jonah 3.10 – 4.11, Philippians 1.21-30, Matthew 20. 1-16

Do you have any sympathy for Jonah? I think I do. I think the sympathy arises from his preparedness to sacrifice himself to save the ship that is taking him to Tarshish and its crew from the storm God has raised, from his prayer of trust in God from the belly of the great fish, from his eventual obedience to God in prophesying against Nineveh. He does take God seriously; there's a seriousness even about deliberately fleeing from the presence of the Lord – better than simply ignoring God's command to go to Nineveh. On the other hand, Jonah never repents of his initial refusal to do God's will. And he takes God's failure to go through with what both God and he, Jonah, have said is going to happen very badly. Perhaps he takes it badly because God's not punishing the Ninevites makes Jonah look bad – the end turns out not to have been nigh. But as God asks, does Jonah do well to be angry at what has happened, or ought he to be rejoicing over the repentance of the Ninevites and celebrating God's mercy? Well, Jonah is defiant in defence of his anger both about the fate of Nineveh and of the bush that God withers in order to teach Jonah a lesson in mercy and kindness. Is this angry defiance of God to be read simply as childish foot-stamping petulance? Or is there some justification for Jonah's attitude? Is there a problem with God's changing his mind and going back on his word, perhaps? Or is there a problem about God's forgiveness of the Ninevites, even though they have repented? It might make a difference to how we answer that last question that the Assyrian Empire of which Nineveh was a chief city has been paralleled with Nazi Germany in its violence (a vice specified explicitly by the Ninevite king) and imperialist aggression. Might it be that Jonah is not just being egotistically petulant but also making a principled stand against what he sees as God's denial of justice in favour of an inappropriate mercy? Jonah's anger might be not only a self-interested standing on what he takes to be his rights - 'it's not fair on *me*' - but also a possibly legitimate outrage that a massively vicious evil empire has been let off scot-free. Where's the *justice* in that?

Certainly, with our Gospel reading the question of God's commitment to justice is in play. Those who have worked from the beginning of the day complain when those who have done less work in the vineyard get paid the same as them, the denarius that is the usual daily wage. The landowner has said explicitly to the second group of workers he hires that he will give them whatever is right, the New Revised Standard version of a Greek word elsewhere translated 'just' or 'fair'. But can his giving of the same pay for different hours worked be considered fair or just or right? The labourers who worked the whole day have every reason on the basis of normal human arrangements and attitudes to complain that they are being unfairly treated. Jonah's 'it's not fair' *can* be dismissed as silly petulance but that's not so easy with these all-day labourers. They *are* being unfairly treated. It's not *fair* and it's not *just* to pay people at different rates per hour for the same kind of work. The challenge is to understand how what the landowner (that is God) does is right, how unfairness and unjustness can be perpetrated by one who calls himself 'good', a more accurate translation of the word rendered 'generous' in our New Revised Standard version of today's Gospel.

Isaac the Syrian, revered as a saint in the Orthodox Church, lived and wrote in the seventh century. Pleasingly in view of our attention to Jonah today, he is also known as Isaac of Nineveh of which he was briefly bishop, a post he left because he preferred the life of a hermit. Isaac writes strikingly on God's justice, or perhaps rather his lack of it:

'Do not call God just, for His justice is not manifest in the things concerning you (you that is as a representative human being.)....How can you call God just when you come across the Scriptural passage on the wage given to the workers. "*Friend, I do thee no wrong: I choose to give unto this last even as unto thee....*" How can anyone call God just when he comes across the passage on the prodigal son who wasted his wealth with riotous living when, just for the compunction which he showed, the father ran and fell upon his neck and gave him authority over his wealth (we remember, of course, the elder son's 'It's not fair' – and it isn't)....Where, then,' asks Isaac, 'is God's justice?—for *while we are sinners* Christ died for us!'

Or again: 'Deal beneficently, not justly. Justice does not belong to the Christian way of life, and there is no mention of it in Christ's teaching.'

Isaac's perspective is one that sees God's dealings with us as characterised by the gifts of grace and mercy not by the imposition of a strict justice – and we are to imitate that in our dealings with one another.

'Mercy and justice in one soul,' says Isaac, 'is like someone who worships God and the idols in one house. Mercy is opposed to justice. Justice is the equality of the even scale, for it gives to each as he deserves; and when it makes recompense, it does not incline to one side or show respect of persons. Mercy, on the other hand, is a sorrow and pity stirred up by goodness, and it compassionately inclines a person in the direction of all; it does not pay back someone who is deserving of evil, and to someone who is deserving of good it gives a double portion. If, therefore, it is evident that mercy stands on the side of righteousness, then justice stands on the side of wickedness. As grass and fire cannot co-exist in one place, so justice and mercy cannot abide in one soul. As a grain of sand cannot counterbalance a great quantity of gold, so in comparison God's use of justice cannot counterbalance His mercy.'

Here we begin to see how a mercy opposed to justice can, though not fair, be right. A measured, well-balanced, reasonable giving to people what they deserve sells short the extravagant generosity and mercy of God and in its failure of Godlikeness may even be held wickedness.

That mercy 'compassionately inclines a person in the direction of all' is telling in our context today, where we are dealing with people, Jonah and the all-day labourers, who have no compassionate inclination towards anyone, but rather stay wrapped up in themselves, attentive to perceived slights and violations of their rights and entitlements, registering the other only as in opposition to them, subject therefore to judgement and in fact undeserving of positive regard. They don't look empathetically beyond from their own predicament to see a formerly wicked but now repentant and rejoicing Nineveh, or to register the good that has come to their fellow workers in the vineyard and express and enjoy a generous gladness for that.

Staying put within his own self, standing on entitlements, attending to slights on the divine dignity, seeing humankind as other and oppositional, as subject to judgement and in fact undeserving is very much not how God is. Out of extravagant mercy and kindness, out of a compassionate inclination in the direction of all, God wanders outside (that's what extravagant means etymologically) - wanders outside himself (empties himself), wanders across (transgresses) the boundary between himself and us sinners, becomes one of us, dies for us, loves his enemies, does not count the cost, forgives enthusiastically, redeems and restores a broken world. This is absolutely not a finicky weighing of anything in the balance, has nothing of the calculation or measure or moderation of justice in it. Where, after all, is the *justice* in mercy, in kindness, in forgiveness, in self-sacrifice, in love?

As Christians we are called to a transgressive extravagance that takes us into a realm beyond mere justice, called to move outside safe, measured limits constructed to protect ourselves from the unreasonable intrusions of others, called to a compassionate inclination towards the other that takes us beyond ourselves into a way of being shaped by the needs of others rather than by what we might feel we are owed or entitled to. Paul in our Philippians reading wants to die and to be with Christ and he and we might feel this is his just desert – but he decides that his remaining in the flesh is necessary for others – and sacrifices what may seem his entitlement. And that in Paul's words is to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

So do not call God just lest that should reinforce in you the tendency to judge and condemn others; do not call God just lest that should justify you in standing on your own rights and entitlements in a mindset of self-righteous grievance and a posture of opposition; do not call God just lest that stunt your capacity to move beyond the boundaries of yourself and the sphere within which you are comfortable to weep over and minister to the suffering of your fellow sinners, stunt your capacity, paradoxically to work for justice for others; do not call God just lest you find yourself worshipping a bean-counting idol rather than the true God whose motivation in his extravagant movement towards us in Christ is precisely to save us from the just consequences of our failure to be Christ-like.

Contemplate those we have seen today proclaiming 'It's not fair', the prodigal son's brother, resentful and unwilling to join the celebrations, the well-paid labourers whining about the good fortune of others, Jonah, terrifyingly unable to move outside his angry self-concern. Not a pretty sight. Reflect how hell is not other people, as Sartre opined, but rather the self turned in on itself. Remember Milton's Satan affirming and regretting 'myself am hell' and being unable to escape himself. Remember the dance of *three* persons as one at the centre of heaven. And if you should find yourself tempted to complain that God's dealings with you are not fair, remember that those dealings will always be right because they will be part of the operation of God's mercy and kindness. And remember you and I and the whole of this Witney Benefice community are called the exercise of mercy and kindness in a compassionate inclination beyond ourselves towards others, the effort and cost of which, the self-sacrifice of which, is not to be measured against and limited by any entitlement to our own satisfactions we may suppose ourselves to have, but which will in fact liberate us from the prison of ourselves and deliver the ultimate satisfaction of our becoming more and more like Christ.