

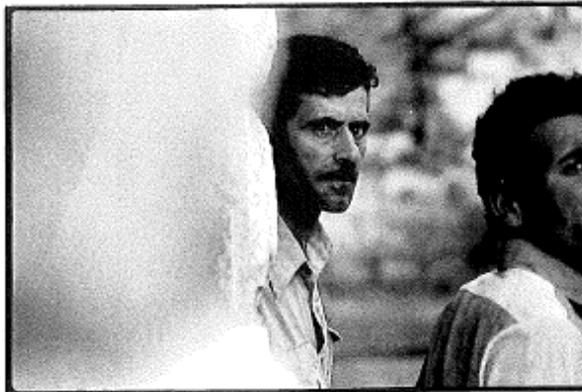
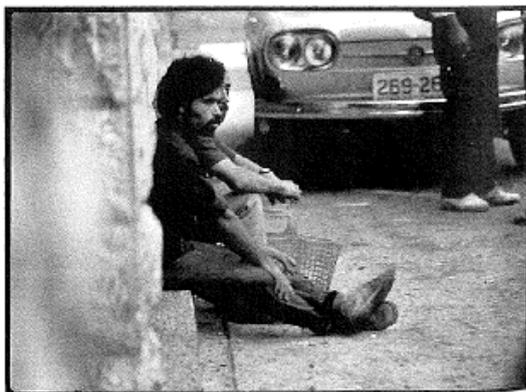
CBC 24 Sept 2017
Matt 20:1-16; Jonah 3:10-4:11
Grace and Justice

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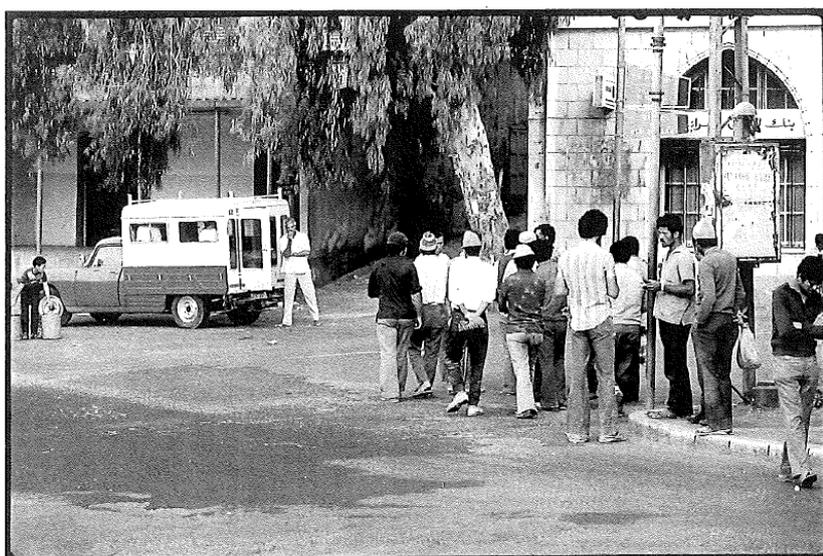
We speak a lot about grace in the church, but the message about God's grace really only challenges us when we hear a parable like the one read to us this morning.

It is a parable like this contrasts grace with justice. In one definition I've heard, justice is getting what we deserve. Grace is getting what we don't deserve. All those workers were treated equally, and if the last ones to start working had been paid last, after all the others had been paid and gone home, no-one would have been unhappy. The perceived injustice came when those who began first were not paid *more* for working longer. I remember talking through this parable with a youth Sunday school group some years ago, and I well remember the vehemence of their reactions to the parable – of course it wasn't fair that everyone was paid equally!

A couple of years ago when researching for a paper I saw these pictures in a book: images of Palestinian men in Nazareth waiting in the town square to be employed for the day.



Nazareth, 1979. Five o'clock in the morning, the city's main street. Arabs seeking work wait to be signed up for the day.



A discussion of wages, then departure for work

From *After the Last Sky* by Edward Said, Photographs by Jean Mohr

The images are from 1979. I immediately thought of this parable, and the reasons why some weren't employed till the last hour. These guys don't look very happy about waiting around for opportunities. If they were waiting round all day, and could only get work late in the day, should they be even more disadvantaged by only being paid for a short

time? After all, the Jewish law says that day labourers should be paid for their work at the end of the day so they have something for their family to live on that night.

But we aren't actually told that the ones who were employed at noon and 3 o'clock and 5 o'clock had been waiting in the square all day. What if they *had* just been skivers, showing up at the last minute trying to cadge a job? Would we still be happy with the landowner's generosity?

So questions of justice start to intrude in our thoughts about grace. Should people on the dole get their payments if they aren't obviously looking for work? That seems to be the justice our current welfare is based on. Should asylum seekers be welcome if they come to our shores seeking a better life for their family or only if they can prove they are genuine refugees whose lives are in danger? That seems to be the justice our Department of Immigration is working with, and then only if they wait "in line" for years and don't take the risk of coming by boat. Should we give beggars cash when they ask if we can't trust them to spend it on food rather than booze or drugs? That is a dilemma people in churches and manses regularly face. I'm not saying there are any easy answers to these questions, only that it is parables like this one Jesus told that forces us to think about them!

But today I'm really wanting to focus on Jonah. This is a really well known story – last year a student turned up in one of my classes who admitted she didn't know much about the Old Testament – for example she hadn't heard of Moses or King David. But she did know the story of Jonah and the whale! And it is a colourful, fantastical story – but this is its downfall too. Stories like this contribute to the view that I've seen expressed more than once that the bible should be rejected as a fairytale. As a colleague Greg Jenks put it: "the central element of the story that Jonah is ingested by a great fish and then safely spat out upon the shore to continue his interrupted preaching tour is too much for most of us to swallow". Although it is included in the prophetic scroll, it is written as a narrative, a story, so I'm going to read it like that, considering *how* the author has told the story and *why* rather than *whether* it ever could happen or did happen.

The first thing the author does, I think, is intentionally throw his readers off balance:

The reason I say it is a narrative is that it is introduced with a narrative grammatical structure, a bit like when a story starts "once upon a time". But immediately there is a typical prophetic formula: "the word of the lord came to Jonah". We get that formula at the beginning of many of the prophetic books. So is this a narrative? Or is it a prophetic book? The word that comes is also quite typical for a prophetic pronouncement: we are hearing God's voice saying *Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me* (1:2).

Now it's not unusual for a prophet to resist their call from God, to protest that they are too young, or not worthy, or not qualified for some other reason. Think of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos. Protest, yes. But no-one expects downright disobedience. So the next words are quite a surprise: *But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD*. Already we can see this story is going to have some humour in it. A prophet of God who thinks he can flee from God's even though a few verses later Jonah claims to be a *Hebrew who worships the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land* (1:9).

The next thing to notice in this narrative is the geography. Jonah Ben Amittai is mentioned in 2 Kings, where we are told he comes from Gath-Hepher. We are used to hearing about prophets in important places, especially Jerusalem, where they can preach to kings and priests and the elders of the Israelites. But Gath-Hepher is a small town in Galilee, near the site of Nazareth, looking over Jezreel valley. From his home town Jonah would have been able to see impressive armies passing through the narrow land bridge where Israel was: Egypt from the south, Aram and Assyria from the north.



And now he is being sent to Nineveh, Assyria’s capital with a message from God. Unlike Gath-Hepher, Nineveh was an important place. A world capital. Full of imposing architecture like these gates – see the size of them. The faces on the statues are the face of the king – it was a proud, impressive city.



The book of Jonah is surely exaggerating when it claims it took three days to walk across it – that would put it on a par with a place like New York, but even so it was significant. Nineveh is east of Israel, Tarshish is west. A long way west. This prophet of God has just turned in completely the opposite direction.

It’s worth mentioning too that Ben Amittai – Jonah’s surname so to speak, could be translated “son of faithfulness”. The author surely means this as tongue in cheek, since Jonah is no model of faithfulness in this book.

I could preach a whole sermon on each of the chapters in Jonah – about the ship that has its own personality, because we are told it was afraid it would be bashed to bits in the story; the pagan sailors who desperately try to save Jonah even when he admits to being responsible for the danger they are all in and end up worshipping God themselves; the fish that changes grammatically from a male to a female when Jonah is inside it then back to male again when he is spat out; the hypocritical piety of Jonah when confronted by danger; Jonah’s five word sermon in Nineveh that doesn’t even have a proper message; the success against all odds of this pathetic altar call; the extravagance of the repentance of the Ninevites where from cows to king there was fasting from food and drink,

sackcloths, sitting on ash heaps and prayers; the speech of the King of Nineveh where he says *Who knows? God may turn and relent, and he may turn from his burning anger and we will not perish* (3:9) – a speech that proves he is a better theologian than the Israelite prophet.

But the passage that was read to us today comes after all this. At the end of chapter three we see that against his will and contrary to his intention Jonah successfully evangelises his enemy. The story may be incongruous, but the author wants us to see it as miraculous. God commissioned Jonah. Eventually Jonah fulfilled his commission, be it ever so half-heartedly. The message hit home. The Ninevites repented. Even the cows! And the story should end here with everyone lived happily ever after... And I want to suggest that if it did, it would be not much more than a fairytale: an entertaining story that every Israelite probably first heard as a bedtime story. Except that not quite everyone did live happily ever after. The book of Jonah continues into the fourth chapter, and that is where the real theology of Jonah lies in my opinion. The story of Jonah could be seen as satire, partly intending to poke fun at the Assyrians. After all, the city of Nineveh *was* famously destroyed in 612 BC and by the time the first audience of this book heard the tale the Assyrians were long gone. But it is in the fourth chapter of the book where those unsettling questions about justice and grace are brought to the fore.

When I told John my texts for today's service he said what angle are you taking? Refugees? Same sex marriage? Indigenous issues?

There is potential to explore all these avenues and more in a sermon about God's grace, but today I want to remain focused on Jonah himself, and by extension each one of us. Because this last chapter moves away from the world stage – the capital of Assyria – and becomes a very personal exchange between the prophet and his God.

The first thing we're told is that the good situation in Nineveh was bad in Jonah's view. The literal translation of ch 4 verse 1 is "and it was evil to Jonah: a great evil ... and it burned in him". The word for "evil" translated "displeasing" in the NRSV is used repeatedly in the book. God's original commission to Jonah was to call Nineveh to account for her *evil*. When being tossed and turned by the storm the sailors resolved to cast lots to find out on whose account the *evil* was happening to them. The king of Nineveh exhorted his people to turn from their *evil* ways. When God saw that they were turning from their *evil* ways, God also relented from the *evil* that *God* had been planning. Chapter 4 opens, as we've seen, with Jonah surrounded by evil. And in his prayer to God he says "*This is why I fled to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from evil.*"

A friend of mine (Mark Biddle) who has written on Jonah describes him as "a petulant, prejudiced, prideful preacher of pitiful prophecy" (a good bit of alliteration there). Jonah said all the right things about God, but didn't seem to believe them. He knew God was merciful and gracious, but he didn't want it to be true. He would rather die than see people who responded to his message go about their newly forgiven lives. I was interested to see that in Matthew's parable the penultimate punch line of the landowner is literally translated "*don't I have the right to do as I wish with what is mine? Or is your eye evil because I am generous?*" (20:16). In both cases – the disgruntled labourers in the vineyard and the disgruntled prophet – the word "evil" is used to describe their attitude which forms a pretty strong contrast with God's generosity and grace. In both cases the generous one asks a simple question. To the vineyard workers the owner asks "*is your eye evil because I am generous?*" To Jonah God says "*Is it right for you to be angry?*" Once again Jonah turns away from God – this time to the east rather than the west. In my family we'd say he put on his franky face – one of the boys mixed up "cranky" and "frowny" when learning to talk and ever since it has been a standard adjective in our house.



Look at the face in this carving. Very franky!

This image shows Jonah sitting under the bush that we hear of in chapter 4. The story of Jonah has several instances of God appointing fauna and flora in order to teach Jonah some lessons about grace – first a fish, then a plant, a worm, and a wind were appointed, perhaps even ordained, by God. The plant, we are specifically told, was appointed to save Jonah from – not his discomfort as the NRSV translates it, but from “his evil” – that word repeated throughout the book. The Ninevites were evil but were saved. The prophet of God is considered their repentance evil, and he needed to be saved from that. The plant is

called a qiqayon – nobody really knows what sort of plant it was because the Hebrew word isn’t found anywhere else. The usual idea is that it was a gourd of some sort – that seems to be reflected in this carving – but I’m going with another suggestion it was a cucumber, because that sounds most like the Hebrew word. The word for worm is found in a few other places, most helpfully in Deuteronomy where we are told God would appoint a worm to eat the vineyards of disobedient Israel. The wind was hot and sultry sirocco, blowing off the desert, allowing the sun to beat down on his head where once the plant had provided shade for his head. We are told that Jonah is delighted about the plant, and suicidal over the wind. Interestingly we aren’t told what his reaction was to the worm attacking his plant. I’ll come back to this.

We have already noticed that there is a lot of repetition in the book of Jonah. Repetition is typical of Hebrew narrative, and another aspect that contrasts this book with other prophetic books which are usually characterised by terse metaphorical poetry. When God repeats the question “*is it right for you to be angry*” something is added: “*is it right for you to be angry over the bush?*” It occurred to me as I was reading this story again this week is that it is God who changes in this book, not Jonah. God begins by determining evil for Nineveh, but relents in the face of their repentance. God begins by commanding Jonah, speaking in imperatives. Get up. Go to Nineveh. Preach. But in the last chapter God is using questions, inviting conversation. God begins with judgement, but ends with compassion. By contrast Jonah’s last speech in the story shows him still opposing his God, just as at the beginning of the story. But God nonetheless seems to be wanting to bring Jonah along. God points out that Jonah was concerned about the bush – remember that gap before? God’s speech fills it by telling us that Jonah *did* care about it. It is an analogy, God implies, for God’s own concern and compassion for the city of Nineveh, including its cows! The door is left open for Jonah to make the link too, and have a different attitude to these enemies of the Israelites.

In this book named after him, Jonah does not have the last word. Both the book of Jonah and Matthew’s parable of the workers in the vineyard are left open-ended. Will the labourers accept the owner’s generosity and learn to see with his eye instead of their own evil eye? Does Jonah leave his evil behind and come to share God’s compassion for a much wider world than Israel can envisage? And do we, hearing these stories today, feel challenged to turn our attention away from our rights, our sense of justice, to see the world through God’s eyes and to open ourselves to be channels for God’s grace? If God can change, shouldn’t we?