

It's Not Fair

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by Andrew A. Kryzak

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalms 145:1-8

Matthew 20:1-16

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The book of Jonah is probably one of the best-known books in all of Scripture. Every Sunday-school student knows the story: how Jonah is swallowed by a whale and then regurgitated. Probably because of its memorability and its sheer silliness, the story has spread far beyond the walls of church and synagogue. At the same time, its familiarity and comic value tend to obscure its real theological message. One could be forgiven for thinking that such a ridiculous story could not have any real meat on its bones.

But like all books of the Bible, the story of Jonah tells us not only something about who God is; it tells us something about who *we* are as well. This is always important to remember: that the Bible has an *anthropological* message, not just a theological one, and that it is impossible to understand anything about God without seeing ourselves as humans in the correct light. What did you think the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent and the tree was all about? An afternoon snack? It's about an honest look in the mirror.

Since we only have heard a piece of Jonah this morning, it will be useful to review the story from the beginning.

The book itself does not give us much background on our main character. The first sentence tells us only that "The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai."¹ Amittai was mentioned in the second book of the Kings as being from Gath-hepher, a border town in ancient Israel, which St Jerome describes as "not a great village."² Jonah is a bit of a country bumpkin, and so in picking Jonah for his task, God continues his tradition of choosing individuals of little account to do great works.

And the word that comes to Jonah is this: "Arise, go to Nineveh," the Lord says, "that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Nineveh was the capital of

¹ Jonah 1:1

² 2 Kings 14:25; "haud grandis est uiculus," Jerome, Commentary on Jonah, prologue.

ancient Assyria, with which Israel was locked in continual conflict, so presumably going there to preach destruction and doom would have been a happy errand for Jonah. But it was also dangerous, going into the belly of the beast, so to speak, and taking a 700-mile journey on foot from northern Israel to do it was probably not an enticing offer.

I think we all know what happens next. Jonah flees; he sleeps; he is thrown into the sea; he is swallowed by a whale; he prays and is thrown back onto the shore. God gives him another chance, and he goes to Nineveh, proclaims doom and destruction, and to his great astonishment, not only do the people of Nineveh “believe God,” they also repent and amend their evil ways. And God does not destroy the city, as he had said by the mouth of Jonah that he would.³ And this is where our story picks up this morning: Jonah is outraged, or as the text says, “[all] this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.”⁴ In his indignation, he went off to sulk, and as we have just heard, he prayed.

It takes a sense of irony greater than usual even for the Bible to call this hateful little piece of self-justifying, self-righteous defiance a prayer. Did you notice what Jonah said? Let me paraphrase:

This is not what you said you would do, God. This is not how these things were supposed to go. This is not what you said you would do to these terrible people of Nineveh, who have done so much to my people, to my country, these wicked people whom you promised you would overthrow, the message you sent me at great cost and difficulty to deliver; how dare you, God, how dare you make a fool of me; how dare you not give them what they had coming to them, how dare you not give them what they deserve.

IT’S. NOT. FAIR.

At least, that was Jonah’s perspective.

The immediate prelude to our first lesson this morning is what happened just after the people of Nineveh heard from Jonah, just after they had heard the word of the Lord that “forty days, and [they] shall be overthrown.”⁵ Led by their king, the people of Nineveh believed God, and they repented. They put on sackcloth and sat in ashes, and they disavowed their violence and wickedness. They heard what Jonah had to say, and in response they didn’t sulk; they didn’t take up arms. They turned themselves over to God’s mercy and committed to a reformed life. That’s what it really looks like to hear the word of the Lord and to say “Thanks be to God.”

³ Jonah 3

⁴ Jonah 4:1

⁵ Jonah 3:5

Who are you in this story, I wonder? Are you Jonah, fuming with righteous indignation? Are you the king of Nineveh, sitting on his ash heap? Does it depend on the day?

I hope by now that the linkage between the book of Jonah and our Lord's parable of the workers in the vineyard will have become obvious. It's actually not only these two lessons today in which we hear parallels; the selection from St Matthew's gospel last week, on which the Rector preached, is connected as well. You can see how our Lord works: he is continually teaching, and like all good teachers, he can explain the same material from many angles. Last week, we heard that the king will forgive even the largest debt, an act of mercy which places duties upon his former debtors to be merciful themselves. And today we hear that any laborer who accepts the invitation to the work in the kingdom of heaven, at any time, will receive an equal reward to those who have served the longest.

Our Lord's age was as obsessed with money as is our own time, but in any age, the idea that Johnnies-come-lately should receive the same reward as those who have served the longest is anathema; it's offensive! The laborers in Jesus' parable who had put in a full day in the vineyard were certainly indignant with their landlord. *They* had worked from sunup to sundown in the heat, and yet those who signed on at noon, at three o'clock, at *five* o'clock even: all received the same wages, the wages for a full day's work. And what did they say?

It's not fair.

My friends, "It's not fair" is not a Christian sentiment. It is sour grapes. It is envy masquerading as justice. What "it's not fair" usually means is that someone else has gotten better than they deserve, and someone feels aggrieved. A mentor of mine says that envy is the only one of the seven deadly sins of which there is no good variant or degree.⁶ You can't be a little envious in a neutral way, the way you can be justifiably proud of an accomplishment or take delight in a delicious meal. Envy is *always* avaricious, always wanting to take something away from somebody else, always begrudging, always petty and small. The vineyard owner says to the laborer, "Are you envious because I am generous?" and that calls on the mat our posture toward generosity as well.⁷ How do we respond when somebody gets better than he deserves?

At the Lord's command, the king of Nineveh repented, and God had mercy on him and his city. If it strikes you as ironic that Israel's enemy, an Assyrian, someone beyond the bounds of God's covenant with Abraham... if it strikes you as ironic that these people should have thrown themselves on God's mercy – and received it! – while God's own prophet sat in his hut shaking his fist at the Lord, then you are beginning to see the story's Biblical logic. Nineveh's

⁶ This is the Revd Andrew C. Mead, who said as much from the pulpit at Evensong some years ago.

⁷ Matthew 20:15

faithfulness is a demonstration that, through Israel (of which Jonah is an emissary), all the peoples of the earth will be blessed, not only those who came early to work in the fields.⁸

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” our Lord promises us.⁹ That is not a qualified statement. Because what we receive is immaterial and spiritual; it cannot be numbered or compared. The marks of a Christian, which we receive when we too throw ourselves on God’s mercy, Paul tells us, are the definitive characteristics of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”¹⁰ Those are the fruits of the Spirit, and they are not dependent on years served. God’s goodness is not equal; it is generous. And so Jonah was correct: it’s NOT fair, because God is not fair. He is “gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness.”¹¹

In sending the Son to death on the Cross, God has paid for us the price that none of us can pay, he has borne the burden that none of us can carry. Jesus Christ was the first, who became last, and we who were last, who were expelled from paradise because we looked upon the tree, thought of God’s command that we should not eat, and cried *IT’S. NOT. FAIR...* we have been made first, and have been rewarded all out of proportion to what we earned or what we deserved.

And so to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty dominion, and power, this day and forevermore.

AMEN.

⁸ Genesis 12:3

⁹ Matthew 11:28

¹⁰ Galatians 5:22-23

¹¹ Psalm 145:8