

Welcome to worship: separated but together in our desire to worship our loving God.
Hymn – StF 24. Come, now is the time to worship

Come, now is the time to worship.
Come, now is the time to give your heart.
Come, just as you are to worship.
Come, just as you are before your God, come.

One day every tongue will confess you are God,
one day every knee will bow.
Still, the greatest treasure remains for those who gladly choose you now-

Come....

Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

Prayer

Loving, ever present God, make us conscious of your presence in our midst.

Open our eyes to the beauty of your holiness;

open our ears to the message of your word;

open our minds to the challenge of your truth;

open our hearts to the power of your love;

Open our lives to the coming of your Spirit, that we may truly worship you, now and forever.

Amen

Introduction to the Bible book of Jonah

Have you ever said **"It's not fair!"** ? It hasn't seemed fair that during the last six months Coronavirus has dominated our lives: tens of thousands of people have died here in the UK and around the world. It is indeed a **pandemic** affecting people in every country.

Some of you may have lost much-loved friends and family members, or been unable to visit them in hospital and care homes. We've been denied companionship as restaurants, pubs and hotels closed along with National Trust houses and gardens: and we have not even been free to be together in Church. **'Lockdown'** has been awful. How relieved we were a few weeks ago when the restrictions were eased. We could visit family and friends, sit in their gardens, though not too close together and not able to hug them. But then the number of Coronavirus cases began to grow again and decisions were made to restrict movement and mingling in various places, including the borough of Bradford which includes Ilkley.

'It's not fair!' we cried. 'We don't have lots of cases here.' Our MP was amongst those who campaigned, successfully arguing that decisions should be more selective. It was not fair to punish us because of what was happening in the city of Bradford!

Life isn't always fair, is it? **This week we're thinking about two stories from the Bible which are about things not being fair.** Firstly, **The story of Jonah.** The book of Jonah is in the section of the Old Testament of **'the prophets'** including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Hosea. Jonah is not keen on his job as a prophet and is angry with God, especially about God telling him to go to Ninevah, the capital of the great empire of Assyria, Israel's deadly enemy.

'... go to Nineva,' God says. 'Go and tell the people how wicked they are and that I shall soon destroy them.' Jonah is not afraid to argue! 'Ninevah and the Assyrians mean nothing to me. I'm a Jew. I wear Jewish clothes, eat Jewish food, say Jewish prayers. They won't believe a word I say.'

Jonah knows his God! He very much doubted that God would carry out his threat. So he ran away. He thought he could hide himself from God and made the adventurous journey to avoid going to Ninevah, which included him being swallowed by a whale!!! He couldn't hide, and God's insistent calling continued. So he did obey in the end. He warned Israel's enemies of God's imminent judgement and called the people of Ninevah to repent (which they did!), praying God would *'relent and turn from his fierce anger... so we shall not perish!'*

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God did take note. God did relent and the people of Ninevah were saved! No doubt God was pleased. But Jonah was not! He'd been made to look a fool. Here he was, an upstanding member of the house of Israel, being used as God's messenger to an avowed enemy, in order to save them from their come-uppance. He was furious with God. He didn't know how he could face his friends and neighbours: when they heard what had happened they'd run him out of town. His life wasn't worth living; he wished he were dead! This is how the story ends.

Reading Jonah 4:5-11

⁵ Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶ Now the LORD God appointed a plant^[a] and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort.^[b] So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Taken from The Fount Children's Bible).

There are plenty of stories on the Old Testament about God condemning and destroying people because they'd gone astray, including the 'people of Israel' who were special him. But this story is about God's grace and generosity, a story to compare with Jesus's stories which challenge our limited understanding of God's nature and purpose. Like Jonah, we're glad our God is gracious to us! But are we happy to think about God being gracious to those we judge unworthy of His love?

Jonah takes to sea to travel as far to the west as he can go, trying to sail away from the presence of the Lord and avoid being obedient. But God was not to be thwarted! I'm reminded of words from Psalm 139.

Where can I go to flee from your presence?

If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

*If I travel to the limits of the east, or dwell at the bounds of the western sea,
even there your hand will be guiding me, your right hand will be holding me fast.*

Words of comfort, but containing a certain threat which Jonah discovered when he realised he couldn't escape: the presence and the insistent voice kept re-iterating the words of command.

Prayer

We ask forgiveness, Gracious God, for those times when we refuse to hear your gracious voice because it is asking us to do things we'd rather avoid. We have gone our own way, not your way, judged others to be less worthy of your love than we are.

Gracious God... forgive us.... and help us to know we are forgiven...

Help us to listen and reflect on the story of Jonah and to respond, accepting our God-given responsibility to be gracious messengers of God's love.

You have made yourself known to us as a loving God; a rescuing God and a God of infinite patience.

We come to you joyfully and thankfully, yet we know that if we are to be truly your children, something of your life must flow in us.

Give us grace to overcome any bitterness or malice and to forgive those we may think have done us wrong, or failed to deserve your love, that we may be able to receive forgiveness for our

own faults and enjoy the freedom of those who belong to your family. Amen.

Hymn – StheF 665. Make us your prophets, Lord (verses 1,2 3)

Tune: Down Ampney – StheF 372

Make us your prophets, Lord,
who truly hear your word,
which fires us with the Spirit's
inspiration.
In all we say and do
prove that your love is true,
the hope and source of peace for every
nation.

And when we fail to love
or set ourselves above

our neighbours with their different way
of seeing.

Bring us with all our pride
where Jesus crucified,
for love of all committed his own being.

Give us his love that shares
our neighbours pain, and dares
to suffer enmity and condemnation.
Whether we live or die
help us to prophecy,
proclaiming peace and reconciliation.

Alan Gaunt

The second story from the bible is one Jesus told about workers in a vineyard. This also seems to be a story about unfairness! I wonder whether you watch the television programme "Countryfile" on a Sunday evening? A recent programme included scenes of harvest, and the commentary included reference to the need to gather a crop (I think it was wheat) whilst a spell of dry weather lasted. With heavy rain forecast there were lots of people, as well as the modern machinery, working against the clock. So, imagine the scene in Palestine. It is time to gather the grapes. Speed is essential.

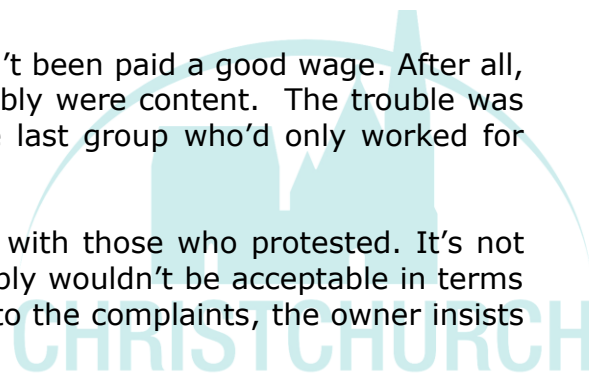
Reading Matthew 20:1-15 *The Workers in the Vineyard*

20 "The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. ³ He went out again to the marketplace at nine o'clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, ⁴ so he told them, 'You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage.' ⁵ So they went. Then at twelve o'clock and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. ⁶ It was nearly five o'clock when he went to the marketplace and saw some other men still standing there. 'Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?' he asked them. ⁷ 'No one hired us,' they answered. 'Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard,' he told them.

⁸ "When evening came, the owner told his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.' ⁹ The men who had begun to work at five o'clock were paid a silver coin each. ¹⁰ So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. ¹¹ They took their money and started grumbling against the employer. ¹² 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'while we put up with a whole day's work in the hot sun—yet you paid them the same as you paid us!' ¹³ 'Listen, friend,' the owner answered one of them, 'I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day's work for one silver coin. ¹⁴ Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?'"

The workers who complained couldn't say they hadn't been paid a good wage. After all, they'd agreed to work for that amount, so presumably were content. The trouble was that others who'd worked less hours, including the last group who'd only worked for one hour, were paid the same amount.

It wasn't fair. Or was it? Perhaps we sympathise with those who protested. It's not logical is it? It certainly doesn't seem fair. It probably wouldn't be acceptable in terms of modern employment legislation! In his response to the complaints, the owner insists



he is doing nothing wrong. Can't he do what he chooses with the wealth which is his? *'Don't I have the right to do what I wish with my own money? Are you jealous because I am generous?' v.15.*

Perhaps, with Jonah, we need to face the truth that the grace of God is not fair. Is it not to our advantage that the grace and gifts of God are not offered because we deserve them? God doesn't judge on the basis of which of us has worked hardest or longest to establish 'the kingdom'? Thank God! What we fail to see in our demands for fairness, is the grace of God is enough for each, enough for all, enough for everyone. Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers for ourselves and others

Thoughts to guide you in offering prayers, aware of being together and yet separate

We pray for our family... friends... neighbours.

We pray that as we walk alongside them, you will use us to bring them close to you, and they will learn of your gracious and abundant love.

Help us to be sensitive to the needs of those around us - the people we see every day, or only a fleeting glance of them as pass by us.

We have no idea what burdens they are carrying, or if they need a kind word from you that only we can give.

Help us to see the positive in people, even when it's hard, and reach out to offer encouragement and hope.

We offer the unspoken longings of our hearts to our God, who understands our needs and accepts our worship because of His love for us. **Amen.**

The Lord's Payer

Hymn – StheF 407. Hear the call of the Kingdom

Hear the call of the kingdom, lift your eyes to the King
Let His song rise within you as a fragrant offering
Of how God rich in mercy came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in His unfailing grace.

*King of Heaven we will answer the call
We will follow bringing hope to the world
Filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name*

Hear the call of the Kingdom to be children of light
With the mercy of heaven, the humility of Christ
Walking justly before Him, loving all that is right
That the life of Christ may shine through us
King of Heaven we will answer the call...

Hear the call of the Kingdom to reach out to the lost
With the Father's compassion in the wonder of the cross
Bringing peace and forgiveness and a hope yet to come
Let the nations put their trust in Him

- Keith & Kristyn Getty & Stuart Townend

The Blessing *May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, and all those we love, today and always. Amen*

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