

Amongst the variety of things in my diary this week was a last-minute invitation to speak to Years 5 and 6 at St Mary's school about the big bang, cosmology and evolution. Why wouldn't you take up an invitation like that? So it was that I found myself in front of curious and inquisitive 9 and 10 year olds asking if you can be a Christian and hold to the Big Bang theory, or evolution; does science and cosmology affect our faith; who made God; but my favourite, what is God like? It's not every day you get to discuss apophatic theology with 9- and 10-year-olds, indeed with anyone! Apophatic theology is an approach to describing God in terms of what God is not. The best basis for talking about God is to say the least worst thing, so in describing what God is not we don't make erroneous claims on who God is. So, God is not an old man with a white beard sitting on a cloud; God is not human, not physical, not gendered; God is not evil; God is not like a distant landlord, uninterested and uninvolved in the world. The one I didn't use but could have, is, God is not fair.

God is not fair. You're not going to get an argument from Jonah on that. This book has been consistently included in the collection of the 12 Minor Prophets despite commentators trying to reclassify it. It is clear that it is a prophetic narrative, albeit a sensationalist prophetic narrative, talk of sea storms, a big fish, a huge city, a plant that flourishes and withers are all designed to arouse

the imagination.¹ The text has been designed to teach us something, and so shares features with parables and allegory but it isn't defined by that, it is a prophetic narrative.² Whether we are meant to identify our protagonist with the prophet Jonah mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, whose oracles concerned the re-expansion of northern Israel under King Jeroboam II (793-753) into land held by Syria we're not sure. And it doesn't really matter, the book of Jonah is self-contained, we can read and understand it by and large without any external references.

We can read it as a warning, "don't be like Jonah." But although Jonah features heavily he is not the main character. The book, like Year 5 and 6, is asking, "what is God really like?" Jonah has a very definite view of what God is like, and God is playing the part. It was absolutely disgusting³ to Jonah that God should show mercy to Nineveh, in his anger he betrays the reason he ran away in the first place, "I knew you would do this, I knew you would be a loving and merciful God, a God who shows unending compassion." Of course, Jonah knows this because Israel knew it, but they limited it to themselves. Of

¹ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, p.435

² *ibid*, p.436

³ *ibid*, p.498

course, Jonah knew it because he had experienced it, saved from drowning, from being slowly broken down by the digestive juices of a large fish, brushed down and sent back. “Throughout the book Jonah displays a readiness to receive mercy and blessing himself and a stubborn reluctance to see his enemies, the Assyrians, receive the same.”⁴

“I knew you would be like this, you’re not fair.” Let’s not fool ourselves, the Assyrians weren’t a benign bunch. They had starved Jerusalem, in an unsuccessful siege and would go on to destroy Samaria. But Jonah is right, what happens to Nineveh is because of who God is; what happens to Jonah is because of who God is. The character of God is on full display here, and Jonah doesn’t like it because it isn’t fair. Don’t we always want God to be on our side, isn’t it easier when we go into battle either literally or verbally, to have in our back pocket God’s approval? Here’s the shock of the book, it isn’t that Jonah can’t stand what happened to Nineveh, he can’t stand God!⁵

And worse, God doesn’t let him off the hook. “Is it right for you to be angry?” God ignores Jonah’s petulant, “let me die” and challenges him, “what right do

⁴ *ibid*, p.434

⁵ *ibid*, p.503

you have to be angry?” We are having flashbacks to last week’s gospel reading. If God is all those things Jonah knew God to be, then what right has Jonah got to be angry? God hasn’t deceived, God hasn’t deviated, only Jonah has got it wrong, it wasn’t that God wasn’t on Jonah’s side, Jonah wasn’t on God’s side, and because of that, Jonah cries, “it’s not fair.”

The same question, slightly rephrased for the context, is thrown into the parable of the workers in the vineyard. “Are you envious because I am generous?” This is another unique parable to Matthew; the vineyard is a standard image for Israel and the payment at the end of the day is laden with Day of Judgement feels. As you’d expect the interpretation of this parable has been varied. Is this Jesus giving us a new economic system? Is it an allegory, the day workers being the Jews and the late comers the Gentiles? Does Matthew’s community contain a grumbling Jewish group annoyed that the Gentiles are getting the same as them? All fascinating stuff, and much better than having to face the central question of the parable, “are you envious because I am generous?”

Once again, our attention is turned away from the events of the parable to the character of the landowner, indeed it has been suggested that the parable

should be renamed the parable of the prodigal employer.⁶ The cries of the labourers that it isn't fair, really are, "you are not fair." The landowner, of course, is right, he pays them all what he said he would pay them, again, as in Jonah, there is no deceit or dissembling.

You are not fair. In some ways the Philippians could have been justified if they had used this cry against God. "We received a gospel of peace, of hope, of love and of joy and what do we get? Suffering. It's not fair." But they don't, and Paul encourages them not to give way to that way of thinking. To live is Christ, to die is gain, it's not a choice of lesser evils. Paul and the Philippians, united in persecution and struggle, see it as the privilege of their faith in Christ.

No, God is not fair. And thank God. If God were fair, we would get what we deserve. If God were fair, Christ would have stayed at the right hand of Majesty and let us sort ourselves out. Mercy, justice, grace, and forgiveness aren't fair. They don't give fair rewards; they are completely unfair. That's what Jonah wrestles with and what the labourers wrestle with. And they're not alone. How many times have we been asked, "so if someone asks for

⁶ Daniel J Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, p.284

forgiveness on their death bed, do they get it? That's not fair!" There is a sense of others getting something easier than we did. But all of us receive God's mercy in exactly the same way.

The story of Jonah and the parable of the vineyard could be seen as mirrors to challenge us. But rather I think they are holding up to us not an image of ourselves but an image of who God is and what God's character is. That is the God we pray to, so if we're praying that our enemies might be taught a lesson then I suggest we won't get very far; if we're hoping that God will prove us right in whatever argument we're in, we might get egg on our face. More importantly, that is the God we meet in the sacrament, the unfair God, who says all of this, all of this is for you. The generosity we read about in Matthew and the love and mercy in Jonah along with the strength in Philippians aren't time limited, they are on offer to us here, today, and through us to our communities.

In bread and wine our anger, our self-righteousness, our self-unworthiness, our imposter syndrome all melt away in the mercy and love of the unfair God that Jonah ran away from. But we don't have to run anymore, the landowner has called, there is work to do, and the unfair God has something for you. So

Year A
Proper 20 / Trinity 16
Jonah 3:1-end of 4
Philippians 1:21-end
Matthew 20:1-16

come, receive again the mercy, love and grace that none of us deserve, then go
and be unfair like the God who loves us and whom we serve.