

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 20 September 2020 ('Sixteenth after Pentecost')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for 20 September, the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020. It has been a pleasure to be invited to share this week's material with Lutterworth URC for use in their distributed service material, which is coordinated by our good friend and former minister Revd Tim Huc.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank John and Charles for reading today and Bill for reading prayers and recording and editing this week's edition.

Introductory Musicⁱ – The aria *Ombra mai fù* from Handel's opera *Serse* (in an orchestral arrangement) performed on the oboe by Edward Brewer, with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, conductor Randall Wolfgang, from the album *Albinoni: Adagio*

Call to Worship: Words from Psalm 145,1-8

I will praise your greatness, O God; I will bless your name forever.

Every day I will praise you and honour your name without ceasing.

God, you are great and deserve our praise; your glory is beyond our understanding.

Each generation shall speak of your worth and celebrate your goodness.

I will meditate on your wonderful work and consider what you have done.

God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and constant in love.

Hymn: *Lord of all being*, words by O W Holmes (1809-94)
sung by the Jubilate Singers, from their album
An hour of hymns of joy

*Lord of all bring, throned afar,
thy glory flames from sun and star;
centre and soul of every sphere,
yet to each loving heart how near.*

*Our midnight is thy smile withdrawn,
our noontide is thy gracious dawn,
our rainbow arch thy mercy's sign;
all, save the clouds of sin, are thine.*

*Grant us thy truth to make us free,
and kindling hearts that burn for thee,
till all thy living altars claim
one holy light, one heavenly flame.*

Prayers

We come before God in prayer, setting aside the busyness of our lives and dedicating this time to Him. Let us pray.

The psalmist said 'I will meditate on your wonderful work and consider what you have done'. We thank you God, for all the beauty of your creation. For sunny September days and clear, starry nights. For the profusion of autumn fruits, for harvests gathered in and for water in lakes and rivers. For the incredible variety that we find in nature, at home and throughout the world.

The psalmist said 'God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and constant in love'. We thank you too, for all your care for us, and for the good done by people for one another in your name. We thank you that your mercy and love persist, even when our behaviour falls short of what it should be. And that you never lose patience with us, however trying we might be.

We confess that we fall short of the standards set by your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, time and time again. We are sorry that we find it so hard to behave as we should, to show the love to others that you have shown to us. We ask again for your forgiveness and we promise to try again to do better, to be worthy to be called your followers.

And we bring all these prayers together, as we pray together using the words that Jesus taught us:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Jonah 3.10 – 4.11

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

^{4.1} But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

⁴ But the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

⁵ Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

¹⁰ But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Reflection (1)

You will know the story of Jonah. This man who, like Moses before him, and so many of the Old Testament prophets, first refuses to believe that this call from God is really what he should be doing with his life.

Jonah takes more extreme measures than the others. Rather than just pleading a lack of public speaking experience, he sets sail from Palestine towards Spain, when he should be heading for Iraq.

The storm, the ejection from the boat, the big fish, the miraculous return, the rather sullen acceptance of the call. All familiar stuff. He delivers his message.

There is a great German word that perfectly describes the attitude that we imperfect human beings sometimes show to each other, when we cannot help but take a little pleasure in someone else’s problems. Schadenfreude.

Schadenfreude. The malicious enjoyment of someone else’s misfortunes. It is often disguised; given a veneer of concern. A really topical example might be to express sympathy to someone who has just been abroad on holiday and then found that their destination was added to the quarantine list while they were away, when a tiny bit of you just thinks it serves them right. Or a political opponent might feel it when observing a government minister squirming under questioning about the latest wildly optimistic promise about Covid testing ... Schadenfreude. And when Jonah walked through the streets of Nineveh, warning the inhabitants that God wanted them to repent... there would be an element of it there, too.

The spoken word, the word he had been told to give, was calling for repentance. But Jonah thought he wasn’t so much calling for repentance as pronouncing a sentence.

At the beginning of chapter 3, after completing his little jaunt in the wrong direction, into and out of the belly of the fish, Jonah finally arrives in Nineveh and proclaims his message. They say it took three days to get through or round or into the middle of this city. The language isn’t quite clear, but even allowing for a little literary licence this was a big place. Lots of people.

But lots of people who were mobilised, once God’s message had got through, to take the right steps. Jonah took umbrage, with the results that we heard in our reading. And the message from God – and presumably the point of the story – is, is He, God, not right to care enough to allow this further chance to this large number of people?

There is a funny little description attached to the final words from God to Jonah.

4:11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

...do not know their right hand from their left.

A lovely word picture of somebody who's clueless; an expression that has come into common usage right up to the present day. In other words, in their ignorance, without having the right way to behave explained to them, would it really be fair for God to wipe them out?

Fairness. God's fairness.

That's what's at the root of our New Testament reading, too. But before we consider that, here's a piece of music that picks up a theme from our opening reading from Psalm 145. Sing to God with joy and gladness...

Song/Music: *Sing to God with joy* [...a setting of Psalm 147 by John L Bell, sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community, from their album *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise*]

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript]

Scripture: Matthew 20.1-16

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

⁷ "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

⁸ "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

⁹ "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired

last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Reflection (2)

Our New Testament reading told one of the most puzzling parables of Jesus, and it's a story that only appears in the gospel of Matthew.

Men are waiting in a marketplace early in the morning, and the owner of a vineyard hires them. He returns at nine o'clock, and hires more, and again at midday. At five in the afternoon, there are still men hanging around, and he takes them on too, just for the last hour.

I went on a business trip to Cairo last year, and for the first time saw something of the harsh reality of an economy where employment rights are few and labour is hired in the most casual way. At intersections on the road in from the airport to the city, and on the road running alongside the river Nile, men stood in the hot sun and waited. Hoping for the offer of work for the day.

But what does this story say to us about fairness?

When it is time for the money to be handed out, then the owner of the vineyard comes back and hands over a complete day's wages to everyone. Put another way, when it's time to be paid, the late comers are given a rather bigger hourly rate than everyone else.

It isn't fair, say the early-birds. They have been slaving away all day and yet have had no additional benefit for it.

We might try to dissect the story and look behind the basic words to the historical context. Imagine yourself going to this marketplace, first thing. A crowd of people are waiting and hoping to be given jobs.

You call out to attract their attention and to say that you are hiring. Who is at the front of the queue? It's the fittest, the fastest, the strongest. In some situations they might have pushed others aside to get there. The people at the back, those likely to still be waiting, later in the day, are going to be the weakest, the poorest, the least well-fed. Those most in need of some cash.

The parable may allude to the fairness of allowing the marginalised and the disadvantaged to have their turn. We are none of us first in the queue every time. In our lives we all sooner or later know what it feels like to be left out, to be passed over.

But the bare words of the parable say nothing of the character of who was employed when.

They say everything about the character of the landowner – the owner of the vineyard.

I think we would be challenged to think of a parable that holds another example of such uniform generosity to different people, apparently deserving of different rewards, as this story of the labourers in the vineyard.

Perhaps that is because we struggle to act like this. The even-handedness of God is almost inhuman.

We struggle. First of all, to treat everyone alike even when we want to. I would imagine it must be difficult to treat all of your grandchildren equally, if you have a number of them. Or, in a large family, all of your children. My gentle father-in-law once complained to me that as the third son of four he came off worst. He had to wear kilts and jumpers that were handed down from eldest to second to third – but by the time he outgrew them they were finally worn out and his little brother got new things!

We struggle to treat everyone alike even when we want to.

We struggle also to overcome the attitude that had the labourers who turned up in the morning pointing the finger and saying “

'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

We could draw a parallel parable for 2020, which saw people in the NHS working harder than ever and at high risk of catching the coronavirus. At the same time, others were working from home, but with a full workload and full pay. Yet others were put on furlough, paid 80% of their salary to stay at home and do nothing. Some were made redundant. And some fell through holes in the safety net and had no income to support them. Not fair!

We struggle to overcome the attitude that had Jonah, sitting in the heat and hoping that God might change his mind about letting the people of Nineveh off, saying he wished he could die.

This struggle is the world we live in. It's the people around us, it's the attitudes within us, it is the way we are.

God's fairness, and the example of the owner of the vineyard, are what we should be striving for. Not to be perfect. Jesus said that God alone achieves perfect goodness. But to make the world a better place, as we care for each other better, putting others' needs before our own when that is right, though remembering to be kind to ourselves too. And so to see ourselves both for what we are and what we can be. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Our prayers are punctuated with a short song from the Iona Community,. Don't be afraid [from the Wild Goose Worship Group album *Come, all you people*]

Dear Lord,

We are fearful. We are fearful for our families, our community, our nation and our world. Fearful for our future and what may lie ahead of us in a period of political turmoil at home and abroad, and as we approach to winter months with Covid-19 not under control. Help us always to remember that however bleak things may seem, you are always near.

We pray for our government, that those in authority might act with integrity and with the best interests of the people at heart. We have high expectations of those chosen to lead us; help them to live up to those expectations, but help us also to be reasonable and to understand the complexities that have to be managed.

Don't be afraid ...

We pray for our planet. At harvest time, and when the hedgerows are full of fruits and berries, we see again the fulfilment of your promise to bless the world with riches. And yet we are fearful for the future of the planet. We hear terrifying statistics about the threat to thousands of species, and we see more wildfires tearing through great swathes of land, this time in the USA. Help us to do what we can, to bear the task you set us to be the stewards of your creation. Even when our efforts seem puny, help us to believe in the collective power of our efforts. Our candles lit in the darkness. And to believe in the power of your love for us.

Don't be afraid...

We pray for our neighbours and our loved ones. As life under the effects of Covid-19 continues, as the restrictions placed upon us ebb and flow, we are fearful for us all. We pray for schools, universities and businesses re-opened, and for all those working in or using them. We pray for our health services, that they should not be overwhelmed by a second peak of virus cases and that people in need of other healthcare services should get what they need without delay. We name before you now, those we know who are ill, or facing the illness of a loved one; those facing death or facing bereavement; those who remain parted from those they love. Help us to know that you are always near to us.

Don't be afraid ...

Lord, we thank you that however dark the times, your love is stronger than our fear. We offer you these prayers, and our lives, in the knowledge of your promise always to be here for us. Amen.

Hymn: *O, for a thousand tongues, to sing* by Charles Wesley, 1707-88
The Huddersfield Choral Society conducted by Joseph Cullen
From their album *The Hymns Album*

*O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise!
The glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of His grace!*

*My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad
the honours of thy name.*

*Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life, and health, and peace.*

*Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,
your loosen'd tongues employ;
ye blind, behold your Saviour come,
and leap, ye lame, for joy.*

*In Christ, our head, you then shall know,
shall feel your sins forgiven;
anticipate your heaven below,
and own that love is heaven.*

Blessing

May we learn to show the generosity of spirit shown to us by God. And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

Music: *Haydn's Trumpet Concerto, Third Movement, Allegro*
performed by Wynton Marsalis with the
National Philharmonic Orchestra, conductor Raymond Leppard

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Credits

The aria *Ombra mai fù* from Handel's opera *Serse* (in an orchestral arrangement) , otherwise known as *Handel's Largo*, was performed on the oboe by Edward Brewer, with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, conductor Randall Wolfgang, from the album *Albinoni: Adagio*

Lord of all being, throned afar was sung by the Jubilate Singers, from their album *An Hour of Hymns of Joy*

Sing to God with joy and gladness, a setting of Psalm 147 by John L Bell, was sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community, and taken from their album *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise*.

The short song *Don't be afraid* by John L Bell is taken from the Wild Goose Worship Group album *Come, all you people*.

O, for a thousand tongues, to sing was sung by the Huddersfield Choral Society, conducted by Joseph Cullen, from their album *The Hymns Album*.

And the *third movement, Allegro, from Haydn's Trumpet Concerto*, was performed by Wynton Marsalis with the National Philharmonic Orchestra, conductor Raymond Leppard.

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ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition