

**Sermon for 10am Eucharist on Sunday 24 September 2023 from Rev Ceri Payne
Jonah 3:10-4:11, Phil 1:21-30 and Matt 20:1-16: The generosity of the sovereign God is not
constrained by human ideas of fairness**

May the words that I speak, and the thoughts of the hearts of us all, help us, by the work of your Holy Spirit, to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, Amen.

Our readings today contain some very unsettling ideas.

In the story of Jonah we heard **“God changed his mind about the calamity ... he had said he would bring upon them”**. Yet it is fundamental to our idea of God that he is unchanging.

In Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, Paul wrote **“God has granted you [not only] the privilege of believing in Christ, but of suffering from him as well.”** We live in a world attuned to **life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness**; how can suffering for Christ be a privilege?

Our gospel reading tells us God does not agree with what we think of as fair. And that God is as arbitrary as he is unchallengeable.

Our readings defy us to accept that God is sovereign. As it says in Is 55:8, **my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways”**.

The idea that God need not and does not obey the rules of our world contradicts our rational sensibilities, developed in the Age of Enlightenment.

God’s sovereignty offends our post-modern conviction that we are free to choose our identities; free to shape our lives and our destinies.

God’s sovereignty is a challenge to our human pride.

But the God of the Bible is indisputably sovereign. The God of Ex 3:14, who says to Moses out of the Burning Bush **“I am who I am”** makes us accountable to God, not the other way around.

Yet the Bible also tells us God is compassionate, going out again and again to look for and to help people who cannot help themselves: sending Jonah to the people of Nineveh, **“that great city [of] wickedness”**, to warn them that if they did not mend their ways their city would be overthrown.

In the kingdom of heaven, the landowner goes out, again and again, to the people who’ve turned up so late to the market place that there’s no work for them. In the kingdom of heaven the landowner **“[chooses] to give to the labourers who arrive last the same as [he gives] to [those who arrived first]”**, paying the daily wage to all the labourers in his vineyard, irrespective of when they start work.

Is this to encourage us that it does not matter to God whether we come to the party early or late?

To reassure us that whether we have much to offer within God’s economy, or fear we can do little in his service, is entirely immaterial to him?

Let’s notice that the focus is on how the landowner responds to the complaints of the first to turn up seeking to work, who received **“the [same] daily wage”** as the last to be hired.

They ***“thought they would receive more”***, and so they ***“grumbled against the landowner [because he made those] last [who] worked only one hour ... equal to [those] who [had] borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat”***.

But the landowner tells them ***“I choose to give [the] last the same as I give to you”***. He calls them out for being ***“envious because I am generous”***, asking them if he chooses to pay the usual daily wage to those who do not deserve it, is he not allowed ***“to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”***

This is not a story about industrial relations in the kingdom of heaven.

It is not even about how much we need to grow in love and generosity before we are ourselves ready for the kingdom of heaven.

This is about the immensity of God’s grace.

It is grace, and compassion, and love, that sends the landowner out, again and again, to invite those standing idle in the marketplace to go into the vineyard.

To reinforce quite how revolutionary this behaviour is, let me tell you about the working practice - the ***call-on*** - that operated in the London Docks for generations. In an interview for an oral history project in 2018, Len Dawes, a docker, told how you needed a family member already working in one of the gangs to have even a chance of getting work – as he did with his father and four of his father’s brothers.

Len told how, ***“at a quarter to eight ... the foreman would call the men out”***.

Len explained that the foreman had a brutally efficient method of selecting only the toughest men. Len described how ***“the foreman would throw brass tickets into the waiting crowd and watch the men scabble and fight to pick them up ... those who missed out would have to wait until [the next day]”***.

Contrast this working practice – which was still in use in the London docks in the 1940’s - with the landowner who ***“[went out about nine o’clock [and] he saw others standing idle in the marketplace.***

He went out again about noon.

And about three o’clock, he did the same.

And at about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around....”

It is surely grace, and compassion, and love, that stirs the landowner to pay those who missed the early-morning call, and are just standing around, far more than they would be entitled to expect.

It is because of that same compassion and generous love that ***“God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon [the people of Nineveh] and he did not do it.”***

This is the love that God is so keen for Jonah to understand: love for people who have done nothing to deserve it; people who are so clueless about God’s love for them that, like the people of Nineveh, they ***“do not know their right hand from their left”***.

Love that Jonah could only begin to understand after he is shown what it feels like to lose what has made him very happy. Love and loss that he would only have felt even more deeply, had he lost what he had grown and laboured over.

It is that same compassion and generous love that took Jesus to the cross, to reconcile to God all of us who realise that we *need* Jesus.

Those who show up *early* for work...

... and those who don't.

Those who are surprised to receive *more than they expected* ...

...and those who grumble about the generosity shown to others.

Those who are constantly anxious about whether they *are* loved by God ...

... and those who *struggle* to jettison the world's measuring scales and values.

Because as long as we have breath in our bodies, it is never too late.

Never too late to take up the offer to come into God's kingdom.

Never too late to experience God's lavishly generous love.

Never too late to seek to share that love with others.

Amen.