

Lord, may the words from my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

*As I went down in the river to pray, studying about the good old ways
and who should wear the robe and crown, good Lord, show me the way.*

O sisters, let's go down, let's go down, come on down.

C'mon brothers, let's go down, down in the river to pray.

Oh Jonah. If only you'd listened to that song from before 1867 and gone to the river instead of fast-forwarding to 1982 and listening to *What about me, it isn't fair, I don't have enough, I want my share...*

If you'd been obedient to God's calling – you may have avoided being swallowed by a big fish. I bet you never complained of dog's breath after that. But Jonah, you who wanted God to confine his love and mercy to Israel and let the heathens get their just deserts. Jonah, you who were far from delighted that God's message *you* delivered had provoked such a fantastic response from the 'heathens' of Nineveh. You were furious, Jonah, with no spark of compassion for the people of Nineveh, and off you went in a huff. God, always ready and willing to help and at the same time teach important lessons, caused a lovely tree with big leaves to grow and shade you from the heat of the day and the hot wind, which quite suited you, until that pesky worm came along, presumably a bit hungry, and made a meal of the shady tree, causing it to wither and die. That wasn't so nice for you. Did it occur to you, Jonah, that you were actually as sorry to lose that plant as God was sorry to lose the people (and animals) of Nineveh? Your feelings of anger and your 'it's just not fair' attitude were thankfully eclipsed by God's feeling of deep compassion for Nineveh.

As with Jonah, our greatest trials come when we feel threatened or hurt by others yet sense God's heart willing us to love anyway with a power that overcomes our fear and dislike. God sets the pattern: despite countless reasons to dislike us, his heart of love overcomes his dislike and he opens his arms to us. Can we allow that supernatural love to spill into our hearts and then flow into the lives of those we dislike?

The psalmist, having a good day, writes, "I will proclaim your greatness, my God and king; I will thank you forever and ever. I will meditate on your wonderful deeds and sing about your kindness, love and mercy. What a far cry from when the psalmist, like Jonah, is not having a good day, instead bemoaning the trials besetting him.

On his Facebook site '*Interrupting the Silence*,' Michael K. Marsh, an Episcopalian priest, wrote about a friend calling him about the sermon she had preached the day before, not happy with how it went. She said, "I gave a really good sermon yesterday. And someone said to me, 'Thank you. I really enjoyed your sermon.'" She said, "I didn't want them to enjoy the sermon. I wanted them to be offended, upset, and bothered by it." I think that's the kind of response Jesus wants from us when we hear today's gospel. We should be offended by it or at least uncomfortable with it. It's a story designed and intended to offend, upset, and bother. It ought to make us say, "Something just isn't right."

Of course it isn't right. It's not fair. And if there's anything we want its fairness (at least for ourselves). And that starts from an early age, when we're children, and for most of us it's hard to outgrow it. We all have our stories and experiences of unfairness.

I am reminded of a time not long after I started school. As the weather was cold, I had probably just turned 5. A school monitor in charge of lost property came into the classroom holding up a pair of fur & leather mittens, asking if they belonged to anyone in my class. I looked around, and seeing no hands to up, up mine went, and these precious, soft, furry mittens were given to me. They didn't last long, though: I ran out to Mum at the school gate, proudly showing off 'my' mittens, and she was horrified and mortified as she took me back inside to the headmistress's office to hand back what clearly weren't my mittens. It isn't fair; I so wanted a pair of warm mittens.....

These days there would possibly be mutterings of entitlement, bad parenting, widowed mother, what can you expect? Back then, I'm not sure what, if anything, was said. Sadly, I did grow up with a sense of entitlement – no idea where it came from – or why. It took me into my teenage years to begin to deal with it, and I have to again each time today's gospel reading comes up. Managed to avoid preaching on this till today.

Matthew tells the story of the labourers hired to work in the vineyard. It doesn't appear fair that someone who works twelve hours gets paid the same amount as someone who works only one hour. The twelve-hour workers are absolutely correct when they say to the landowner about the one-hour workers, "You have made them equal to us."

But Jesus says that's what the kingdom of heaven is like. It makes no difference that some work twelve hours, some nine, some six, some three, and some work only one hour. Regardless, each one received what she or he needed, the usual daily wage. And Jesus goes on to say "with humans this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

So in the kingdom of heaven one worker isn't worth more than another. One cradle Anglican is worth no more or no less than someone very new to faith in later life. It's less about fairness and more about equality. Each one receives what they need.

Playwright and screen writer Timothy Thompson has written a play based on this morning's parable depicting two brothers, each vying for work. John is strong and capable. Philip is just as willing but has lost a hand in an accident.

When the landowner comes, John is taken in the first wave of workers, and as he works in the field he looks up the lane for some sign of Philip.

Other workers are brought to the field, but Philip is not among them.

John is grateful to have the work, but he feels empty knowing that Philip is just as needy as he.

Finally, the last group of workers arrive and Philip is among them.

John is relieved to know that Philip will get to work at least one hour.

But as the drama unfolds, and those who came last get paid a full day's wages, John rejoices, knowing that Philip—his brother—will have the money he needs to feed his family.

When it comes to his turn to stand before the landowner and receive his pay, instead of complaining as the others, John throws out his hand and says with tears in his eyes, "Thank you, Lord, for what you have done for us today!"

God's grace is beyond what we can fathom. God's love is beyond comprehension. Life is hard. It's unfair. It can be extremely cruel and unforgiving. But God is not like that. If we are still standing around in the marketplace without Christ, he is still looking for workers in his vineyard. No matter our age or what we have done with our life, he wants us to come and be part of his kingdom.

The work is not easy, but it is more rewarding than anything else in the entire universe. For God is generous and he loves us.

As I went down in the river to pray, studying about the good old ways and who should wear the starry crown, good Lord, show me the way.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment, come with me on a short journey. Join me down at the water for prayer. Imagine yourself standing barefoot at the water's edge. Listen to the lapping of the water. Move a little closer. Let the refreshing water wash over your toes, your feet, your ankles.

As I went down in the river to pray.....

please repeat this prayer of thanks after me:

Thank you, Lord, for what you have done for us today

Thank you, Lord, for what you have done for us today. Amen