

Year A Proper 25

Jonah 3: 10- 4:11

Philippians 1: 21-30

Matthew 20: 1-16

Fickle Hearts

I was walking Jep in glorious sunshine on Friday when I found myself humming the tune to Mumford and Sons 'Awake My Soul'. It is a song about how flawed we humans are; that we all have fickle hearts, we all tell lies to ourselves and to each other, and what we love we focus our lives on. And yet, the song reminds us, or perhaps even warns us, that we should wake up, even to our very core, our soul should awake, as one day we will meet our maker. Jason Mumford is a good lyricist and musician, and I think he made the right decision to leave his undergraduate course at Edinburgh University and pursue his dream as a musician about 17 years ago.

The first verse of the song goes:

How fickle my heart and how woozy my eyes
I struggle to find any truth in your lies
And now my heart stumbles on things I don't know
My weakness I feel I must finally show

Let me see if I can persuade you that there is a link between the song and our readings today, and how they fit in to the theme of Creationtide.

Firstly I was so glad to see we got a wee bit of the Book of Jonah. I really have to commend that you read the whole Book of Jonah. It is a wonderful story, with a strong message. I will add it to our Bible Study list to do in the New Year.

We pick up the story after Jonah has done an excellent job of warning the people of Nineveh that they must turn from their evil ways or else suffer the destroying wrath of God. So persuasive was Jonah, that all the people and animals wore sackcloth and ashes as a sign of repentance and they truly changed.

God was, of course, true to his word, 'being gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love '. But Jonah was upset. He may have

expected to have sat at a safe distance from Nineveh and watched its destruction as he had no expectation that the people of Nineveh would take him seriously, listen to his warnings and even more impressively, actually repent and radically change their lives.

Jonah may have thought that even if they changed their minds, it would be too late. Even if the people of Nineveh started to live righteous lives they had such an history of being evil that God would not be compassionate and merciful? If so, he was disappointed. Jonah knew that if they did listen, God would not harm them. Jonah was angry, and said he wanted to die. And then when the bush which had given him shelter shrivelled up in the heat Jonah again said he wanted to die because of the heat. Really?

How fickle was Jonah's heart. From the start he was focussed on his own life, his own agenda, his own ego and pride, and his own well-being. His own self-interest dominated his thinking, he really did not have one jot of compassion for or interest in the well-being of the people of Nineveh.

In Paul's letter to the people of Philippi we also get a sense of a fickle heart. Paul is torn between living and being fruitful in his labour or dying and being with Christ. We get a real sense of the internal struggle he faced. Paul discerns that God has need of him as an evangelist, as he concludes he is called to support their 'progress and joy in faith' and 'share abundantly' in the proclamation of their faith.

In Matthew's gospel we may find ourselves conflicted as we reflect on this parable. Is it right that someone who has worked hard all day should receive the same amount as someone who is employed for only the last hour of the working day? The last person to sign up for work may have spent most of the day sleeping under a palm tree, or drinking and playing cards with friends....

How fickle the hearts of the labourers could be. Perhaps you are thinking how fickle could the landowner's heart be? And given our reaction, based on fairness, how fickle our hearts can be...

This parable describes something of the nature of God to us, and it is uncomfortable. It goes against our human understanding of fairness. I wonder if this connects us with Jonah at all? Jonah's model of the world, and his personal hopes of God was that God would act as Jonah wanted. Is our personal reaction to the landowner's actions similar to Jonah's?

Is our personal view that each labourer should have got that same hourly rate, so would have received different amounts at the end of the day? Are we uncomfortable with the landowner's actions, even though we understand the parable well and know the parable's landowner is describing the actions of a gracious and merciful God? How fickle our hearts can be...

Ok, you may be wondering, how does this fit in to our theme of creation, and the climate emergency?

Each of these readings describe something of God's provision. The gospel reading in particular really makes us wake up and grapple with the clear conclusion that God's provision is based on grace and love. God's provision is not based on any concept of having earned it, and therefore the amount of God's provision is not based on one hour's work or ten hours work. To put it another way, God's economy is a lot different from the one we live by. It is based on generosity, love and abundance.

Our human economy is driven by creating demand, preferably greater than supply so the price goes up and profits increase. Our human economy has greed as an essential component, to focus on and drive up profits for shareholders, and all the evidence shows wealth is now more focussed in far fewer people than at any time in the last century.

Our economy is based on the premise that we can have economic growth every year. Just think about that. In a finite world, is economic growth able to continue indefinitely?

Economic growth, focussing on GDP, doesn't seem to have done much for the quality of life of the populations of most developed countries, and yet we seem wedded to this model. How fickle our hearts, when we see the damage it causes to our world, the consumption of raw materials, the despoiling of lands as mining and agriculture take over more land.

How fickle our hearts when we know the models of consumption by the developed countries requires that other countries must live in relative poverty, there must be scarcity built in to increase profits, and many people labour a full and long day and receive so little for it that they can hardly exist; not leading the sort of lives Jesus talked about.

We pray for the kingdom of heaven to be on earth, and surely that kingdom is universal and means we pray that all humans can lead lives which are not just full of toil, hardship and suffering?

Kate Raworth, in her book 'Doughnut Economics' challenges us to wake up and acknowledge that our current economic systems and policies and whole ways of thinking and behaving are damaging to the planet and to our own personal quality of life. Our obsession about focussing on growth, focussing on growth to the point that we have such tunnel vision that we don't see the damage and cost of this obsession, is well described. I wonder if we fool ourselves, and want to fool ourselves that there is no cost to innocent people elsewhere on God's earth in how we live our lives and like sheep follow the economic model of growth?

Kate Raworth says that a healthy economy should be designed to thrive, not grow. To thrive, not grow... to bring all of humanity into a sweet spot that meets the needs of all within the means of the planet.

When I read that, it chimed with our gospel reading. All of humanity in the gospel story received what it needed to live for that day. There was sufficient for all. A picture of the kingdom of heaven on earth; a picture of God's grace and love.

We can kid ourselves that our nation's consumption of the world's resources are sustainable, we can kid ourselves that our nation's consumption of the world's resources does no harm to other humans, we can kid ourselves that our nation's consumption of the world's resources does not harm God's creation. But in reality, when we stop being as selfish and self-focussed as Jonah, we know that our actions cause suffering and hardship to others, our actions cause suffering to animals and plants and lead to species extinctions, our actions have caused and continue to cause climate change and sooner rather than later it will impact on global food production and sea levels will rise leading to unprecedented population movements.

Are we 'alright Jack'? Are we sticking out heads in the sand? Are we forlorn and lacking in hope?

Or do we have hope? Do we use that hope to inspire change in ourselves and our communities, to explore and feel invigorated to seek new ways of living, a way of living that shows love to our neighbours, across the world.

Do we have the courage and hope to be part of the change, to genuinely seek out ways we can personally change our behaviours and our attitudes? What do we currently love that we invest in that hurts God's creation? What needs to change, what do you need to shift the focus of your love towards? Or will we still be humming 'How fickle our hearts' and not change a thing as the planet heats, burns and floods and God's creation is desecrated?

The final lines of the Mumford and Sons song are:

In these bodies we will live, in these bodies we will die
And where you invest your love, you invest your life

Awake my soul, awake my soul
Awake my soul
For you were made to meet your maker

I pray we all awake and get in touch with our innermost being, to truly appreciate God's love, grace and mercy, and only in that way will we fully understand what God is calling us to do.

Fickle hearts? I hope not. But constant loving hearts, yes.

References:

Book

Raworth, K. (2018) *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to think Like a 21st Century Economist*. Penguin Random House. London

Music

Awake my Soul, from the album 'Sigh No More', Mumford and Sons.