

CCOW's Preaching Notes for Fairtrade Fortnight 2026

Week 1: Sunday, 20 September

These are the notes for the thematic readings in the Revised Common Lectionary. We have used the [Vanderbilt online lectionary texts \(RSV\)](#) to prepare them.

- [Jonah 3:10-4:11](#) and [Psalm 145:1-8](#)
- [Philippians 1:21-30](#)
- [Matthew 20:1-16](#)

Overall themes: God's generous love and mercy – and Christians' call to reflect that in our lives.

Jonah 3:10 – 4:11

This passage closes the Book of Jonah, one of the best-known narratives of the Bible. We join the story at the point where the people of Nineveh, in response to Jonah's prophecies of judgement, have repented and prayed to God. God, in turn, has relented ... and Jonah is not best pleased.

Two themes you might want to pick up:

1. God is ready to forgive those who acknowledge and turn from their wrongdoing

Nobody in this story argues that the Ninevites have led blameless lives. The people of Israel reading this would have known all too well [the brutality that the Assyrian Empire practiced on those it fought and conquered](#). Even the ruler of Nineveh himself recognises the problem: he commands, following Jonah's preaching, that each inhabitant should "turn from his evil way and put aside the violence that is in his hands." Yet despite the clear evidence against them, when the society repents, God is ready to forgive.

We live in a world where there is much wrongdoing and violence – including the injustices perpetrated on many of the people who make the goods that we eat, drink, and use each day.

For example, some conventional banana farms still undertake aerial spraying of harmful chemicals without adequate protections, damaging the health of farm workers, their families, and the earth itself. To give one instance, [Public Eye investigated banana farms in Guatemala](#) which frequently sprayed fungicides directly over – and hence onto – workers, and which also paid low wages, deducted illegitimate costs from wages so that they were effectively below the national minimum, and blacklisted employees who try to organise unions.

Similarly in a [March 2025 survey of people working in the tea industry in Kenya, 70% of tea workers said that their biggest issue was wages](#): many could not afford to meet the cost of their families' needs. Some tea plantation owners also [require workers to pay for services that they should, in theory provide](#), thereby causing the workers to [borrow from – and end up in what is effectively bondage to – their employers](#).

Behind the individual instances of injustice lies the wider systemic injustice of international trade rules and practices. Overall, wealthy countries' manufacturers and retailers hold an inordinate amount of power relative to small farmers – a state of affairs which the heavy concentration of power in a few companies in the retail food sector is exacerbating. The result is

that, to take one example, [an Oxfam paper found](#) that, “for every kilogram of packaged Assam tea that is sold, tea brands and supermarkets take a sizable cut – up to 95% in some cases – while a marginal proportion – less than 5% – remains on tea estates to pay workers.”

We are not directly responsible for all these issues. But we are sometimes complicit. Those of us who have enough money to make choices about what we buy sometimes avoid finding out too much about corporate practices and how they affect the people behind the products we purchase. There may be many reasons for this. But there are some easy ways of determining whether people have been treated justly – like looking for the Fairtrade label. And if we aren’t trying to find out, at least some of the time, are we really loving our neighbours?

Each of us can consider whether and/or where we may need to ask God’s forgiveness in this area. We can also think how we might work with others to change the wider systems, perhaps through joining the [Fairtrade Foundation](#) and [Transform Trade](#) as they press for legislation to prevent environmental and human rights abuses in companies’ supply chains. Or perhaps we might wish to raise particular issues with a company whose practices give us concern. If the brutal Assyrians could be brought to repentance, even the most unjust of businesses and governments has the potential for redemption. The good news of Jonah’s story is that when people and institutions listen to the truth and want to change their ways, God is ready to forgive and to help us do better.

2. Prophecy can inspire change.

The prophetic message God gives Jonah is simple – “40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” It’s also effective: the people believe God and heed the messenger’s words.

Throughout the Scriptures, God gives us clear messages about our calling to love our neighbour and to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” Like Jonah, we may well also be called by God to speak on these topics – perhaps to our families, friend groups, colleagues, or politicians – and like him, we may sometimes not want to do so. Maybe we wonder whether speaking will do any good. Maybe it feels uncomfortable. Maybe we don’t have confidence in our speaking skills.

Jonah’s story is a reminder that speaking truth can make a genuine difference. If we feel called to speak, we can pray to God for wisdom about how and to whom. And we can pray that, as with Jonah, our words may be part of God’s plan to bring about the spread of God’s love and mercy and justice.

Psalm 145: 1 to 8 – God’s mercy and love, a portrait for praise

We seek fairness for people and planet out of love for neighbour – but that love itself flows from the source of all love, God’s own self. Psalm 145, which is a bridge between [the “main body” of the Psalter and the final Hallelujah psalms](#), is a song of praise that directs our eyes towards this wonderful God, describing God’s attributes in detail.

The Psalmist announces his intention of extolling and blessing God, his King, and explains why God is worthy of all praise. God is “great”, “mighty”, a doer of “awesome deeds”. But God’s greatness is not simply a question of power: it is a greatness defined by perfect “goodness” and “righteousness” and by the mercy and love with which God regards sinful human beings. “The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

As we search for greater love and justice – in our own hearts and in our world – we need to look constantly towards the One who is the origin of all that is good. Doing so is a source of joy and wonder, inspiration and strength - a reminder of how much we need forgiveness and the extent of the generous love that spent itself to gain that forgiveness.

Philippians 1:21 to 30

“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel and in no way frightened by those opposing you.”

What does it mean to live our lives “in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ”?

When Jesus was asked to sum up the law, he referred to the commandments in the Torah to love God with all our heart and mind and soul, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. When he was about to be crucified, he intensified that call to love: “A new commandment, I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you.”

So living in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ can mean many things – but is first and foremost a matter of loving God and those around us.

One of the most effective ways of reminding ourselves why Fairtrade matters is to ask the question “How would I feel if?”

- How would I feel if I were a banana plantation worker and my children were being affected by the pesticides sprayed over our living quarters?
- How would I feel if I were a cocoa grower, working ever harder to grow my crops despite the floods and droughts that are becoming more frequent in our warming world ... and yet I was not paid enough for my labour, while my products gave other people pleasure and made companies wealthy?
- How would I feel if I were a young person in a cocoa-growing family which couldn't afford to send me to finish my education?

After letting ourselves ponder these questions, we can ask the follow-up: “What would it look like for neighbours to show love to me?”

One way of looking at the Fairtrade standards is that they are a start at portraying what love and justice in trading relationships might look like.

- They set a Minimum Price for each product, which offers a safety net for farmers and workers when market prices fall, while enabling farmers and workers to benefit from higher market prices if they are available.
- They add on a Fairtrade Premium, an additional amount of money, based on volumes of sales, that producers can invest according to their own priorities – whether that's to fund local clinics, help children with their education, pave roads for easier access to markets, improve access to water, or any other development need.
- They mandate certain standards for buyers, including the development of longer term contracts and reasonable terms of payment.
- They [set rules for](#) “rights at work, safe conditions, and democratic structures in producer cooperatives, ensuring farmers and workers have a stronger voice.”

So a worker on a Fairtrade plantation would not need to worry about indiscriminate pesticide spraying harming their family ... or about being blacklisted for joining a union. A cocoa grower in a Fairtrade cooperative might not yet be getting all the income they needed (in part because there isn't yet the demand for many cocoa growers to sell their whole production to Fairtrade buyers) but would be getting more than the farmers around them selling at market rates and might have access to Fairtrade-funded schools, clinics, and roads. And the example of the young man who wanted to go to university but couldn't? That's taken from a real-life story ... and the young man went on to join a Fairtrade cooperative and to put himself through university with his earnings.

Looking wider, when we buy Fairtrade goods, we're not only taking steps to live out our calling to love our neighbour – we're helping to show that Gospel values have a place in today's world. Thirty-odd years ago, the conventional wisdom was that the fledgling concept of Fairtrade would never take off: why would people pay more just to ensure that other people had fairer pay and conditions? The discovery that economic benefit wasn't the sole determinant of purchasing patterns for people who had enough money to make choices was a revelation ... that pointed towards God and God's kingdom.

Matthew 20: 1 to 16

This Gospel passage is often known as the 'Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard' – though many Bible scholars argue that the focus is rather on the generosity of the vineyard's owner.

The 'householder' who searches the market for labourers would clearly have been understood by the original listeners as God – the imagery of Israel as a vineyard and God as its owner runs throughout the Bible.

Looking at the story at the literal level, the householder is shown as just with wages: those that are agreed at the outset are a fair and [indeed perhaps more than fair](#) day's wage. In God's economy, the poor wages that make life so difficult for many farm workers have no place!

But the clear aim of the story is [to make a point about discipleship](#). It builds on Christ's words to Peter in the preceding verses, which promise that "At the renewal of all things ... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life," but adds "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

The call to discipleship is one, Christ appears to be saying, that some will hear early and some late. Whatever the case, the same generous God is the one who calls each disciple, and that God will give with a generosity that is a function of the divine goodness, love, and mercy, not a function of the specifics of a particular disciple's service. Any attempt to quibble with someone else's reward is a manifestation of our envy ([or literally 'evil eye'](#)), a strange response to abundant mercy.

The story is an exercise in perspective setting. It asks us to move away from a mindset that tries to measure our worth – as disciples or more generally – by seeking primacy over those around us. It asks us to move towards a mindset that focuses on thanking God for all that we have been given and honours the generosity that has enough to fulfil the needs of all.

Imagine what our world – and our economy – would look like if we took this fully on board!

Maranda St John Nicolle

September 2026