

**Sermon: 24 January 2021 Epiphany 3** Jonah 3:1, 5-10; 1 Cor 7:29-31; Mk 1:14-20

***May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.***

If you've been following the lectionary readings this week and have been looking forward to hearing what I have to say about Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. No such luck! I'm going to leave for another day, a single, academic man's perspective of the virtues and vicissitudes of marriage, and of the need for us to live in the moment. Today it's Jonah and the Ninevites.

The book of Jonah is *about a prophet*, rather than a collection of his prophecies. The book is divided into two main parts. In chapters 1 and 2, Jonah is commissioned by the Lord to take a message to the Ninevites, but Jonah doesn't like the task and runs away in the opposite direction "away from the presence of the Lord", to sea in the direction of *Tarshish*, a place now unknown but likely some distance away, perhaps telling us more about the strength of the ship than the place he was going.

When a storm hits, so strong that the ship threatened to break up ... *the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god*. The seamen cast lots to identify one of their number as a sacrifice to ease the god's distress. Jonah admits to the crew that he has indeed angered his God and offers himself to be cast overboard. The crew initially ignore his offer and try to row out of trouble, because they don't want to spill an innocent man's blood, but they are unsuccessful and ... over he goes. The sea instantly ceases its raging ... and the seamen fear God (capital G) even more!

Enter the whale or *big fish*. Jonah is swallowed whole and sits inside the fish three days and nights with no deliverance in sight. Having avoided God when he was on-board the ship, Jonah now has no other

avenue for his salvation, and prays in the form of Psalms from 1 Sam 2 and Isa 38:

*Out of the belly of Sheol I cried and You heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all Your waves and Your billows passed over me ... yet You brought up my life from the Pit ... as my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to You ... Deliverance belongs to the Lord!*

(vv. 2: 1-10)

And with that the fish spews Jonah out onto dry land! He is spectacularly and instantly delivered safe and sound a second time. No wonder he was in no doubt about the efficacy of the Lord his God!

And so, we come to chapters 3 and 4 ... *The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time ... Get up, go to Nineveh ... proclaim to it the message that I tell you ... Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*

(vv. 3:1-4)

Same message! On the way through however, the narrative makes sure we fully appreciate the size and complexity of the task Jonah has been given: *Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, ... three days' walk across (v. 3)*.

This next bit is where I need to be careful that my imagination doesn't run away with me! I have a vision of a petrified, reluctant Jonah creeping quietly into the middle of the enemy's stronghold, and then running flat out for the gate, shouting at the top of his lungs, one time only ... *Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*

The rest of the chapter says simply ... *And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth ... including the king who went as far as to sit in ashes and make a proclamation:*

*No human being or animal ... shall taste anything ... they shall not feed or drink water ... and they shall cry mightily to God (again, capital G). All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change His mind.*

(vv. 7-9)

And here, Jonah's greatest fear comes to pass ... when God saw this genuine repentance ... He changed His mind and did not bring upon them, the calamity that He had planned to.

*Lord is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning ... I knew that You were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, ... abounding in steadfast love, ... ready to relent from punishing ... please take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live.*

(vv. 4:2-3)

Then a bush and a worm, the heat of the sun and a *sultry east wind* play their parts. Jonah is still angry; he resents the very same mercy and compassion he has been shown, being shown to his enemies; he turns his praise for God into condemnation. But God responds:

*Is it right for you to be angry ... you are concerned about the bush for which you did not labour and which you did not grow ... should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more*

*than 120,000 persons (a very large number indeed) who do not know their right hand from their left?*

The story is left hanging but we are in no doubt about the nature of God. His mercy and compassion are for all His children ... those of every nation ... not only those who happen to be Jews, or even those born in geographical Israel.

Our gospel story too, reveals the full extent of that mercy and compassion. Jesus calls a series of fishermen (and others) to the task of fishing for people; Simon, Andrew, James and John ... as well as you and me. The message is clear, we are not to be selective about who gets to be saved but indeed all those He sends in our direction. All those whom God sends into our net are to be saved, irrespective of where they come from, or when.

There's another aspect too; the apostles are revealed as those who believed and obeyed God. Abraham too, believed and obeyed God; he left his father's homeland and family behind because God asked him to. In many ways Jonah is offered as a reluctant, even recalcitrant believer ... and he is taught a painful lesson. We too, have a choice and our reluctance will have consequences ... God will have His way.

God, by His grace, brings mercy and compassion to *all those* He calls. None of us do this by ourselves. None of us deserve to be saved. Every single one of us accepts a gift freely offered, *inspite of everything we have done*.

Epiphany is the season where we look again at the wonderfully magnanimous nature of the One Who sent His Son to live and die and rise again, just because we needed Him. Let's look again and appreciate just how blessed we are ... and *share with others* ... one more time, the joy we claim as our own. **Amen.**