

Sermon - the response of commitment

Based on Jonah 3.1-10 and Mark 1.14-20 (NRSV)

The book of Jonah

- You might have already heard me say that Jonah is one of my favourite books from the Old Testament.
- Jesus seemed to value it as well, referring to it a number of times.
- When we allow ourselves to be amused by the intentional melodrama in it, then we give ourselves permission to see when God might be speaking to us in equally amusing situations in our own lives.
- Let me remind you briefly how the whole of this book unfolds, in its four short chapters.
- Chapter 1: the word of the Lord comes to Jonah, saying, 'Get up, and go to Nineveh ...', so Jonah gets up, and tries to go as far away from Nineveh as he can.
- After an exciting sea voyage he ends up in the belly of a great fish, or whale.
- Chapter 2: is mournful Jonah's prayer to God from the belly of the fish - after which he is regurgitated onto a beach.
- Chapter 3: is today's passage; *The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh ...' (Jonah 3.1)*
- Since he now knows he cannot escape his mission, he goes to Nineveh and proclaims his message of doom.
- Wonder of wonders, they actually believe him, and repent.
- In fact, they believed him so promptly, that he didn't even get to complete his tour of the city.
- Chapter 4: Jonah is exceedingly angry with God for being so merciful, because he thinks the Ninevites did not deserve mercy, and he sits down on a hill overlooking Nineveh, hoping that God will punish them after all.
- But all that happens is that he suffers from heatstroke and loses an argument with God. The end.

The melodrama and the theology

- The writer of the book of Jonah has put in a lot of amusing exaggeration.
- The city of Nineveh is so huge that it takes three days to cross it.
- The Ninevites immediately believe Jonah's message of doom, and immediately make themselves remorsefully uncomfortable by fasting and wearing sackcloth.
- The king then makes a proclamation, and goes quite overboard, demanding that even the animals should be covered in sackcloth, and no-one - not even the animals - should eat or drink, and that they should all cry out mightily to the Lord - even the animals.
- I can just imagine one of the early synagogues when this story was read out, and everyone having a good chuckle at the idea of animals crying out mightily to the Lord - when they would have actually been letting their owners know that they needed water.
- It's also good to recognise, as I've already said, that just because it's an amusing story, that does not mean there isn't some serious theology in it.
- Jonah is quite a flawed prophet, and yet God still uses him.
- And though he tries to escape the mission God has given him, he is able to acknowledge God's presence in the midst of the storm in the sea, and even in the belly of the whale.
- His prayer might refer to seaweed being wrapped around his head, but is nevertheless a great prayer of hope and trust in God.
- And his argument with God in chapter 4 invites each of us to participate in debating with God, about why he responds favourably to people we judge to be bad.

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The calling of the fishermen

- I'll refer back to this passage later, when I look at the interesting pairing this reading has with today's Gospel passage.
- But for now, let us engage directly with the Gospel story.
- I remind you of my comment from two Sundays back about Mark's literary style.
- Mark doesn't use too many words, but gets on with the action.
- We see one of his typical words - *immediately* - appear twice:
 - immediately [Simon and Andrew] left their nets and followed [Jesus].*
 - He saw James ... and ... John ... Immediately he called them ... (Mark 1.18-20)*
- Mark doesn't explain or comment on what he describes, but is focused on the actions:
 - John is arrested, so Jesus goes to Galilee and proclaims the Good News.
 - He calls Simon and Andrew to follow him, and they do so.
 - He likewise calls James and John, and they also follow him.
- And so his ministry starts, with proclamation, and with calling.
- As hearers of the Gospel we can make all kinds of speculation about what each of these individuals were thinking and feeling, and how and why they acted the way they did.
- And it can be useful, and even insightful, to speculate like this.
- Nevertheless, we must not let such speculation divert us from what Mark is focusing on, which is simply this:
 - Jesus says that God's kingdom 'has come near', and people that we have a high regard for make a radical and wholehearted commitment to participating in that.
- I'll repeat this single sentence summary, because this is the key message for us today:
- Jesus says that God's kingdom 'has come near', and people that we have a high regard for - the first disciples - make a radical and wholehearted commitment to participating in that.

Compared to our church now?

- Why do we need to be reminded of this?
- Sometimes we might feel so far removed from the social, cultural and geographic circumstances of the gospel stories that we struggle to apply what God might be saying to us in them.
- I'll briefly describe the situation here in our church building complex only 24 hours ago.
- Members of the parish council gathered together for a planning meeting for the year.
- We referred to financial budgets, building works, rosters, subcommittees, and service schedules.
- For those of us who value all the blessings that our church organisation brings to us and to others, we recognise that these things, when engaged with wisely and judiciously, can be the means through which God's kingdom can be made manifest.
- Nevertheless, it can be easy to become bogged down with such organisational priorities, that we end up missing the whole point - the real reason why we're trying to get these other things right.
- So we need to hear again Mark's simple direct stories of Jesus, and of the people who respond to him.
- We need to look at the young fisherman John, who might have been the same John who, as an old man in exile on an island far from home, wrote the book Revelation, and who we name as St John the Divine, the patron saint of our church community here.
- We need to look at our patron saint as a young man, who made such a radical commitment both to Jesus and to the message of Jesus, and ask God to inspire us in the same way.

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Jonah and Mark together

- Let's go back to the story from Jonah.
- Jonah walks through Nineveh, and proclaims the word of God.
- Sure, he warns of God's wrath rather than proclaiming God's kingdom, but the people recognise it as good news, because firstly they are being given a warning rather than just being subjected to the doom, and secondly they are clearly being given the opportunity to make amends and come good.
- So regardless of the detail, in both of today's stories God's word is proclaimed.
- And in both of the stories there are people who are able to recognise and comprehend these messages as being genuine - as being proclaimed by prophets of God, Jonah and Jesus, who are each committed in their faith relationship with God.
- And in both of these stories these people - the Ninevites, and the first disciples - make the radical decision to fundamentally change their lives, and align themselves wholeheartedly with God's purpose and will.
- The first story comes from an amusing melodrama, while the second story comes from a revered Gospel account - but they are communicating the same message to us:
- God's kingdom is at hand - turn from being self-centred and be God-centred.
- Well, here at St John's we might indeed need to attend to our parish budget, and start renewing rosters of people to assist with different aspects of our services, and attend to the maintenance and administration of our sacred space and church organisation
- - but this should only be done in the context of focusing first on God's kingdom, as revealed in and through Jesus Christ, and then ensuring that we keep realigning ourselves radically with God's purpose and will.

So may you aspire to be alert to the proclamation of God's kingdom.

May you be able to recognise it, and be encouraged to respond to it.

May you be compelled to radically commit yourself to following Jesus, and keep turning from being self-centred to being God-centred.

And even as you live your lives in your modern day circumstances, may you keep yourself focused on manifesting God's kingdom here and now.

In his name. Amen.