

THE SIGN OF JONAH

Reading: Jonah 3:1-10

One of the problems with our lectionary – the table of readings that we follow, along with many other churches each Sunday, is that we sometimes only get snippets of the bible.

In wanting to speak about the Book of the Prophet Jonah, I realize that one short reading from Chapter 3 is hardly enough for anyone to grasp the message of the whole book, one of the most important little books in the Bible Library of 66 books. Jesus said that his ministry and message was like that of Jonah, so we clearly should reflect on that message – Jonah's and his.

You would probably know that the main thing that people remember about Jonah is that he was swallowed by a big fish and reputedly lived for 3 days and nights in the belly of the fish before being vomited out onto dry land. So discussion then takes place about whether someone can live inside a big fish for three days, and come out alive.

My point of view is that that discussion misses the point. It's a symbolic but powerfully true story, I believe. Jonah is asked to go and preach to the great city of Nineveh and he doesn't want to go. In fact he runs off in exactly the opposite direction. He was a very disobedient and reluctant missionary, as we often are. We may hear the call of God upon us and turn away, especially if we don't like the job we have being given.

In this case Jonah, representing the Jewish nation, doesn't want to bring the good news of God's love, mercy and forgiveness to a large, sinful, Gentile city, the capital of Assyria, one of the chief enemies and constant oppressors of the Jews. It was too hard, and as is betrayed in chapter 4, Jonah didn't really want Nineveh to be forgiven by God – he wants them to get their come-uppances. When Jonah does finally go and do as God tells him to, the Ninevites repent and turn to God en masse, from the kingdom. Jonah is then angry – very angry.

'He prayed to the lord and said: "O 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; for I knew you were a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better to die than live." And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"'

This is precisely Jesus' message. He came with the good news of the gospel – the good news of God's grace and God's forgiveness to be offered to everyone.

He told the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. In the story, those who were hired late in the day received the same wage as those who had borne the burden and heat of the day. When those people, representing the religiously righteous pious people protested about the johnnie-come-latelys getting the same as them, the owner said to them, 'Are you angry, are you jealous, because I am generous?' 'Do you do well to be angry?', he could have said. It was the same with Jesus' story about the younger son and the older son. The prodigal had wasted his money on riotous and sinful living in a far country. His father welcomes him back and puts on an expensive party. The older brother refuses to join in, and is offended and angry. This attitude on the part of the religiously righteous explains why Jesus was put on the cross. His inclusion of sinners, tax collectors, depraved women, Samaritans and Gentiles offended the righteous very deeply.

God wills everyone to be saved, and come to knowledge of the truth, said St Paul. The narrow religious conservatives, accused of causing religious riots and upheavals of traditions and communities and sent off to the Roman emperor to be tried as a revolutionary, persecuted him. He lost his life because he was an obedient missionary to the Gentiles and because of his message of inclusiveness.

What about us? We hear Jesus' call to be his followers and disciples: 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people!'

Now this isn't always an easy or welcome task. We prefer to go out to those we like, those we feel comfortable with. We don't want to deal with the ones who've mucked up our settled world, those who are potentially our enemies. We don't like being taken out of our comfort zone. In any case, some people only get what they deserve, why should we help them?

And lets face it; there is often a cost to being too inclusive, too generous, and too multi-cultural. They might be terrorists in disguise. There is genuine danger in being too trusting, too idealistic about anyone.

We've had the dangers put to us so strongly and persistently in recent times that we Australians are certainly in danger of turning in on ourselves, and serving and protecting ourselves so much that we lose our tradition of openness and inclusiveness. As time goes by every human community, in fact every religious community also, always has the danger of being enticed into inwardness, selfishness and fear of outsiders and those who are different.

Let's face it, dear friends, greying congregations may become safe, inward-looking congregations. We've all got to guard against it, and not lose the enthusiasm of our first response as Christ's disciples – the original vision.

Even Peter, whom Jesus called a Son of Jonah when he first called him, later on denied Jesus when the going was tough, and after being forgiven and getting going again, turned back from the vision of inclusiveness that God gave one day on the roof-top. He turned back from eating with Gentiles, and Paul tells us that he had to rebuke him to his face.

I want to conclude with a hymn I wrote several years ago when a same sex couple, both friends of mine and both keen Christians, felt excluded by the church, and one at least was so depressed that suicide might have been a possibility.

THE EUCHARIST OF HOPE AND INCLUSIVITY

1. The table of God's grace
is set, and Christ is here
to welcome, challenge and forgive,
to banish narrow fear.
2. He trod a painful road,
his word set people free,
for one and all his life he gave
to kill all enmity.
3. God's all-embracing love
breaks human barriers down:
we meet and touch each other's need
and grace is fully known.
4. We taste a love that's real –
love for all humankind –
it drives out fear of difference,
expands, renews our mind.
5. No other option stands:
all in the world must see
the church live out and celebrate
Christ's inclusivity.
6. Our hope is for the time
when prejudice is dead;
come, drink afresh Christ's heady wine
and seize the day ahead.

© Owen Dowling, July 2001

Metre 6.6.8.6

Suggested Tune: St Thomas (TIS 271)