

JONAH – RELUCTANTLY REACHING THE LOST

Today I have been led to preach to you on the book of Jonah. Many people know the book just from its references to fish's bellies and jinxes cast, seeing it as a fable, a book of lesser weight. But it is full of wonderful truths about God's justice and mercy to humanity, and his mission to us as ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors for Christ the lost in Pembury, our workplaces and the world as a whole. Some of these I hope to share with you. First, since it is short, let us hear the text itself.

Jonah was a historic and not a mythical figure. He was the prophet bringing good news to Jeroboam II of Israel, that he would defeat the Arameans by God's good providence; 2 Kings 14:23 notes that Jeroboam "was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher." Also Jesus named Jonah more than any other prophet: Look at Matthew 12:39-42 "He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." So Jesus saw Jonah's experience as foreshadowing his own crucifixion and resurrection. Moreover, he used the example of the wicked Ninevites to criticise the Jews of his day: "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here."

Against such a background, we cannot but take the book extremely seriously. Some historical background is that Nineveh, one of the largest cities of its time, was the ancient enemy of the Israelites. The Assyrians were already raiding the frontiers, and they were bywords for cruelty and ruthlessness. As Nahum tells us, Nineveh "plots evil against the LORD and counsels wickedness" as well as causing "many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses-- all because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft". Only a few decades after Jonah, the Assyrians from Nineveh would take the Northern tribes of Israel off to an exile from which they would never return. So Jonah's reluctance to go there was partly understandable. He patently held to the view that God should have similar priorities to him, keeping Israel as his chosen people and opposing other nations, echoing oracles against the nations from other prophets. But he also understood God's greatness, and he greatly feared that Nineveh would repent at his words and thus be spared from destruction. Hence his attempt to get as far away as possible!

God clearly comes through as the Father of all humanity and not just a country deity of the Israelites, and their exclusive possession. What a God he is! Not at all the wrathful caricature seen by those who neglect to read the Old Testament. In Jonah's words, quoting Exodus 34, he is "a gracious and

compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity”. Jonah knew, as in Ezekiel 33, that God takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live”. Let us explore further. God is sovereign, deciding whom he will save and not subject to pressure from Jonah, always ready to do something different from before. God’s miracles abound, not only Jonah’s survival in the fish but also God’s control over the sea, the growth of a vine, the wind and even a worm – and all driven by his care for humanity. He must have guided the sailor’s lots to choose Jonah too. We cannot hide from God – as Jonah found and as David memorably stated in Psalm 139: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”

God is merciful, ready to give not only the Assyrians but also Jonah another chance following transgressions. He disciplines Jonah like a father, sending the storm, saving him via the great fish and teaching him an important lesson about his compassion for all humanity via the vine plant. Despite his justice and consequent hatred of sin, he offers grace to the sinning Ninevites, forgiving them out of love for them when they repent. “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.” Jonah himself is resurrected from within the fish, showing how God can bring life from death. All of these wonderfully foreshadow the ministry of Jesus, who died to save all of humanity.

I want to go deeper into three issues in Jonah, namely the doom of unbelievers, the scope for revival and repentance and our required response to the message of the book. Linking these is the fact that we have the same mission as Jonah – to reach out to the lost! Jesus told us in Matthew 28 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Or Romans 10:14 “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” As stated in 2 Corinthians 5:19 “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation”. God is dwelling in us and wants to express his love through us to everyone we meet. God loves everyone else as much as he loves us. Let us see what light is cast on this Great Commission by the book of Jonah.

The doom of unbelievers is, I think, strongly brought out in the horrifying experience of near-drowning that Jonah suffers: “The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.” Jonah knew he was going to hell and is thus to be “barred” forever from God’s presence. The Israelites had a particular fear of the sea and a horror of drowning. Their enemies would sometimes drown Jewish captives to increase their horror at execution. Jonah would undoubtedly have been terrified of going on a sea voyage, underlining his determination to avoid God’s bidding. There is

a recurrent theme throughout the Bible that the sea implies chaos and destruction, as for example in Noah's flood, the Red Sea, the storms that the disciples experienced on the Sea of Galilee, Paul's shipwrecks and the prophesy that in the New Earth and New Heaven there "would be no more sea". The sea cuts off the drowning person from humanity and from God, the two pillars for our existence. The near drowning of Jonah symbolises also a downward spiral of desire, sin and death caused by rebellion against God, seen in the lives of Eve, Cain and David. Jesus' command of the sea was a key sign of his divinity.

A powerful poem "The Castaway" by the 18th Century poet William Cowper brings out the link from drowning to spiritual terror and the agony of death separated from God. It relates to a seaman lost from his ship in a storm, which makes it impossible for his fellows to return for rescue. Listen to a few verses "Obscurest night involved the sky, the Atlantic billows roared, when such a destined wretch as I, washed headlong from on board, of friends, of hope, of all bereft, his floating home for ever left...He long survives, who lives an hour, in ocean, self-upheld; and so long he, with unspent power, his destiny repelled; and ever, as the minutes flew, entreated help, or cried – Adieu... At length, his transient respite past, his comrades, who before had heard his voice in very blast, could catch the sound no more. For then, by toil subdued, he drank, the stifling wave, and then he sank." The final verse brings out the poet's own spiritual despair that he links to the fate of the mariner; "No voice divine the storm allayed, no light propitious shone; when, snatched from all effectual aid, we perished each alone; but I beneath a rougher sea and whelmed in deeper gulfs than he."

I found this poem, and other literature of atheistic despair, affected me profoundly just before I became a Christian. It gave me a deep vision of how life, and ultimate death, are when separated from God. My own conversion came in the darkest night when I was tormented by satanic voices. And here is the point – if we do not proclaim Jesus to those now lost, we condemn them to just such a fate as drowning. The fires of hell, it is often said, cannot be worse than the separation from God that unsaved death involves. Let just that thought put wings on our words!

Just contrast that poem and its despair with the hope Jonah suddenly feels as he gives up the struggle and allows God to take over "But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple." I felt the same, with my call for Jesus to save me being answered by clear white light, as when surfacing from deep water.

God himself provides a moving portrayal of the lost when he describes the Ninevites as "a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left". This is a description of children, helpless unless instructed, not knowing the difference between good and evil, unable to make moral judgements, with no relationship with God their saviour. The Ninevites, in their wickedness and

idolatry were in bondage, in the dark, blindly flailing about. As Paul says in Ephesians 2 Christians too before their salvation “lived in the passions of our flesh” and “we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”, which should increase our sympathy. Do we not see this all around us – in the great city of London and the South East? In Pembury? Is God not calling us to help – to man the lifeboats?

This is if you like a “negative” aspect driving us on to fulfil the Great Commission. There is a more “positive” encouragement to be had. Redemption and revival break out twice in the book among pagans with no prior knowledge of God or the Bible! Let us look first at the sailors in Jonah’s ship. We can assume that they have experienced bad weather often before. But as soon as this storm arises, they become aware that it is supernatural force, leading them all to pray to their respective gods. Jonah remains asleep in the hold despite the storm, but awakes to give a minimal witness “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.” This is enough for the sailors, who are terrified but still reluctant to cast Jonah in the sea, lest they sin. “Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.” Look at the strong parallels with Jesus calming the storm after sleeping – how much greater an impression that must have given the disciples!

A yet greater redemption awaits, as Jonah’s message leads to massive repentance in Nineveh, Nahum’s city of wanton lusts, mistress of sorceries and counsellor of wickedness. “On the first day, Jonah started into the city. “He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.” The King declared ““Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”” This is a thoroughgoing revival, with mighty cries of repentance (call urgently), a change from an immoral lifestyle (evil ways) and a turning away from social injustice (violence). Thanks to God’s prompting, the most unlikely people can come to know him – we only have to look at ourselves! Why should others be any different?

What are the lessons for us? In some ways, we need to be more like Jonah! What a witness he gave to Nineveh, that the whole pagan city would repent in sackcloth and ashes! That the pagan sailors would worship the God of Israel! Perhaps his success in Nineveh came partly from his testimony; he had just witnessed the doom arising from sin and God’s saving grace. His skin may even have been white and his face fixed with horror after his time in the fishes belly, a living proof that God does what he intends in judging sin. But do we not have a yet greater tale to tell of how Jesus was dead for three days, before his bodily resurrection from the dead, triumphing over Satan? And thus how we were

once dead from sin but are now alive in Jesus. “Look at our lives” as the song states. We are not just “sinners saved by grace” but “new creations in Christ”, and people notice it!

I think that Jonah’s success also reflects a sensitivity to God’s promptings in the Holy Spirit. Despite his earlier rebellion, he remained open to God’s voice and indeed in his prayer asked for a second chance. Ultimately Jonah was obedient to God’s will, even operating far outside his “comfort zone”. A memorable point made at Detling was that God provides us with “ability” but we command our “availability”. Like Jonah, we need to accept God’s discipline for as it states in Hebrews 12 “whom the Lord loves, he disciplines”. Like Jesus, Jonah as God’s anointed prophet spoke out only the words that God prompted him to say, bringing together the Word and the Spirit; our knowledge of the word is a crucial weapon in reaching out to people, answering their questions about God. What a trust in God he had too, once he came to his senses in the cold and merciless sea: “In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.”

But in other ways, we also need to be less like Jonah! His anger at Nineveh’s salvation is sinful, showing a vengeful and unforgiving spirit, a thwarted desire to manipulate God. This is a powerful contrast to God’s patience and a lesson to us: “Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?” God has a right to be angry with the Ninevites for their sin but chooses to offer them forgiveness. And as said in Hebrews “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. Of course, Jesus has shown us an example of righteous, justified anger, in his “zeal for his Father’s house” cleansing the Temple with no trace of self-regard. But when will our anger ever match his in purity of intent, rather than being petulant like Jonah’s? As James tells us “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”

It is also crucial for us to appreciate how self-centred Jonah is. He wants to put God in a box, for God to care for his own country alone. He forgets God’s purpose to redeem all humanity through the Jews in Genesis 18:18 “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him”. He sleeps in the ship rather than praying for the storm to be calmed, dragging the innocent sailors into his own sinful rebellion. Calling the sailors to cast him in the sea could be seen as brave, but may rather be cowardly suicide, with the blame for his death being cast on others – wishing to control his own fate even if he cannot control God. He callously wishes that Nineveh should be destroyed, disobeying God’s initial order. He cares about his comfort under the vine more than the fate of the lost. He is even ready to die if he does not get his own way. The heathen sailors, seeking to save his life, showed more humanity than he, the man of God, did. There are echoes of the unmerciful servant in Jesus’ parable, who does not see how God’s mercy to him puts him under an obligation to be merciful to others.

However, we should be sympathetic to Jonah. Are we never like that? Don't we want to argue with God or even give up sometimes, when our children, our marriages, our jobs, don't meet our expectations? Do we meet God's standards for obedience and mercy, when he asks us to operate outside our "comfort zones"? Even if we do not run away, we may just sit happily in church and let the lost stay lost, failing to use the gifts God has given us in the ministry of reconciliation. Singing of God's grace, mercy and compassion while avoiding saying anything to the godless lawless and disobedient outside, we can all too easily treat the Great Commission all too often as the Great Suggestion – a charge I feel applies strongly to me. The story also poses us difficult questions about those we consider our enemies or beyond the pale: Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, paedophiles and child murderers among them. Can we deny that God loves them and would spare them if they repented? What should be our response?

Part of the answer has to be emulating the models of mercy in the Bible. Think of how Abraham pleaded with God to save Sodom, if only ten righteous men can be found there. Think of Jesus looking over Jerusalem saying "how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings". Think of Paul in the prison ship, who certainly prayed for the safety of pagan sailors before the angel said "Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' And finally contrast Jonah's callousness with God's mercy to the Ninevites "Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

But the broader point is to question how much of our lives we are willing to give up to God. Are we sincere when we sing the hymn "I will offer up my life in Spirit and truth..."? I believe that Jonah wrote the book finally convinced that God was right, and he did indeed thereafter act as God's faithful servant, having experienced for himself the fate of the lost! So we must proclaim with Jonah "Salvation comes from the Lord", in Pembury, in our workplaces, in the wider world! We must see the world with compassion as God sees it. This implies giving up on our selfish desires and working with him, being sensitive to his will, avoiding selfish anger. We must be available for him and not seeking our own control of events. And we must be a sign to our generation, accepting the ministry of reconciliation, encouraged by the revivals set out in Jonah.

Prayer: Father, thank you for this book, and through it, a look at our own hearts. How like the stubborn prophet we are, intent on our own goals and comforts and all too often unconcerned about those around us who cannot tell their right hand from their left and whose blindness and terrible fate touches your heart of tender compassion. We pray that our hearts may reflect your own heart, and that we will show to them your love and compassion in declaring the message of truth, in Jesus name. Amen.