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## Sermon

### ***Repent and Believe!*** ***Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3***

25<sup>th</sup> January 2015

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I said last week that this Epiphany season celebrates the revealing of the nature of Jesus to people. Now, we hear about him stepping into his public ministry. The common word in the Old Testament and Gospel readings is repent. What does that mean to you? Is it only about 'big' sins - the things you don't do?

The word simply means to change your mind. Not necessarily anything shameful: "Would you like tea or coffee?" "Tea. No, I'd rather have coffee." A change of mind.

### **Jonah**

The Book of Jonah is a study in repentance. Let me summarise the story.

Jonah was a prophet in around the 8<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. We know this from a reference to him in Second Kings where a prophecy of his was fulfilled. He came from Gath-Hepher which is just a few miles from Nazareth.

God called Jonah to go to Ninevah, the Assyrian capital and to call the Assyrians to repent from their great wickedness. These cruel oppressors were renowned for slaughtering their enemies, making piles of the skulls of the vanquished and playing games with the dead bodies. Ninevah is in the North of modern Iraq. Instead, Jonah set off in the opposite direction towards Spain.

God called up a great storm at sea, and eventually the ship's crew cast Jonah overboard in an attempt to appease God. Jonah describes sinking down into the water to the seafloor.

"The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; ... When my life was ebbing away I remembered you, Lord and my prayer rose to you."<sup>1</sup>

Then he prayed for help And God sent a great fish to rescue him. Jonah declared, "Salvation comes from the Lord." Salvation comes from the Lord. Have you experienced a time when God rescued you?

When I was 23, I developed a fever which became a progressive paralysis. It crept up from my toes to my chest before it stopped. I was hospitalised and then convalesced for six months. Afterwards, I didn't know whether I should attribute the restoration to God answering prayer or to the medical treatment. Then I was in a prayer meeting where someone delivered a prophecy in which he described precisely the fears I had as I

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<sup>1</sup> Jonah 2:5-6, 7

waited to go to hospital and concluded, "That is how you would have been if I had not intervened. But I did intervene." I am very grateful for his rescue. Psalm 116 expressed my feelings well:

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, save me!" The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. <sup>8</sup> For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living."<sup>2</sup>

After his rescue, God again called Jonah to prophesy against Nineveh. This time he went. [Repentance #1].

Jonah reached Nineveh and made his proclamation, such was the conviction that God brought on them that the whole city was afraid and fasted in sackcloth. The king issued a proclamation:

"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." <sup>3</sup>

Jonah's warning was a great success: the people of the city repented and God forgave them. [Repentance #2]

However, Jonah was angry. He knew God was merciful and he did not want the Assyrians to be forgiven! Jonah sat and sulked for a couple of days. A vine provided some shade for him. He was glad of that. When it died and the sun beat on him, he was depressed and wished he could die.

The story ends with God again calling him to repentance again, saying,

"You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?" <sup>4</sup>

We are not told the outcome although it is reasonable to infer that Jonah did change his mind again since he told what had happened to him. And that makes a third repentance.

## Repent and Believe

I started here at St Stephen's in 2009, 6 years ago. I wonder if you remember my first sermon here?

What should I say as I started here among you? As I thought about it, the message was clear: "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe." But I needed to stick with the Lectionary readings and what would they be? When I looked them up, I was astonished to see this gospel reading:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" <sup>5</sup>

## Repentance

We all know those words of Jesus. I used to think it was simply about making the decision to trust him for salvation and a change of how we live. It is about simple salvation but I suggest it is more too.

In the first century:

- Some Jews were faithful and alive to God – Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, John.
- Some tried hard to please God but had little relationship with him.
- Many thought God was distant.
- Some would even have turned to other gods which they thought might help.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 116:1-5,8-9

<sup>3</sup> Jonah 3:7-9

<sup>4</sup> Jonah 4:10-11 (New Living Translation)

<sup>5</sup> Mark 1:14-15

Into that setting, Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is near!" A kingdom is where a king's rule is. He was saying God's rule, his authority, his influence is near. It is not far away but close at hand. And if his rule is close, he is close too. He is interested in the everyday life of his people. He does care and he does intervene.

## Worldview

What we believe is influenced by our worldview. A world view is how a group of people understand things work. To make sense of the world and the things that happen we develop an understanding of how things work. This is mainly determined by what our culture understands.

Our worldview is a very strong effect on our understanding and our ability to believe or even be aware of what is happening. If something is impossible according to our worldview, we will dismiss what we see because it cannot have happened.

## Spiritual Reality

Western culture has a worldview about spiritual things:

- Probably no spirits like demons and angels.
- God is distant or does not exist.

Because of that worldview, it is very hard for us to believe in healings, miracles, deliverances, or God acting.

Other cultures see life differently:

- Very aware of the spiritual world.
- High God far away.
- Need to please the gods and demons.

Deep repentance is needed to bring us freedom for our culture and unbelief. <sup>6</sup>

## Kingdom of God is Near

Jesus proclaimed, "The kingdom of God is near." It is whenever God breaks into human affairs to achieve his purpose: healing, miracles, deliverance, new life, ... Jesus himself is the King of this Kingdom. This is a kingdom at war with the kingdom of darkness. We can follow him or his enemy but there can be no divided loyalties.

## Repent!

Jesus called for a response – repent. Come under new rule and obey Jesus. This is far more than saying sorry for minor things.

In 2009, I said if you disagree with Jesus either you or he is wrong. I'll give you a clue – it ain't Jesus! So you need to change your mind and agree with him. Turn around and go the other way.

## Believe

Make a radical change in your thinking and actions. Choose to believe what Jesus says.

What we believe has great power over our lives. Let me give you an example. From 1998 to 2006, I had trouble with my left jaw joint. At its worst I could only open my mouth about a centimetre. The dentist, the GP and the hospital were not able to relieve the condition. In 2004, a student couple prayed for me and there was a click and it released so I could open my mouth to a two finger gap which was a great improvement. Over the next 2 years I had prayer for it a good number of times to no avail. One day, I had just prayed for a woman with severe, chronic RSI and she was instantly healed. As I thought about it, I said to the Lord, "How come she got healed instantly, and my jaw doesn't get healed?" Through my mind went an account from a book where the author had asked why he didn't get healed. He had the thought, "Because you don't believe I want to heal you."

I was surprised but decided to take it seriously. I said to God, "I thought I believed, but you tell me I don't. I am sorry for doubting you. I choose now to believe you do want to heal me. Jaw, be healed in Jesus' name."

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:1-2

Two hours later after a wedding rehearsal, I checked my jaw and found it would open fully to a three-finger gap again.

I was harbouring an unbelief I did not recognise. But when I changed my mind, God was able to heal me.

## Conclusion

We have seen Jesus called people trust in God who is present and ready to act in our lives.

Do we need to repent?

- Do we put our trust in other gods, other philosophies or ideologies?
- Do our cultural values outweigh Biblical values?
- Are we choosing not to believe what Jesus says?
- Is it a matter simply of wilfulness or selfishness?

The call to all of us, to me and to you, is repent and agree with Jesus – and so believe the good news.

Will you do it? Will you change your mind? Will you believe what your Saviour says?

How about taking some time with Him to ask what needs attention here? You could make notes below for yourself. List whatever he brings to mind – then decide to make the change of mind.

Once your mind is changed, how will you act differently?

Ask Him to help you – He wants to be your strength. His Spirit is within you to strengthen you.