

Sermon

21 January 2024

Challenge to Change

Readings: *Jonah 3:1-5,10; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31*

Gospel: *Mark 1:14-20*

Introduction:

In our Old Testament reading today we have heard how Jonah, son of Amittai, has been told to go and proclaim the word of the Lord to the people of Ninevah. Now these people, the Assyrians, were enemies of the Israelites, so it is perhaps understandable that Jonah has no wish to cooperate with God's will in this matter. So rather than heading in what I take to have been in a northeasterly direction (Ninevah being in the north of what we know today as Iraq), Jonah heads off in exactly the opposite direction. He boards a ship in Joppa bound for Tarshish in order to avoid God's calling on his life.

I wonder if any of us have done that? Run from God's calling?

Once on board, they set sail for Tarshish and then hit exceedingly dangerous waters in a violent storm. With the ship threatening to go down, each of the sailors prays to his own God, but to no avail. Then, finally, the captain goes in search of Jonah, who is asleep in his cabin, (Does that remind us of anyone else who fell asleep in a boat in a storm?) and urges him to pray to his God in order that they will not perish. Jonah, once up on deck, acknowledges to the captain and the sailors that he is a 'Hebrew, who worships the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land'. Jonah also tells them that it is his fault that they are in this terrible storm, since he disobeyed the word of the Lord, and had been running away to avoid the Lord's express command to him. He tells them they need to therefore throw him overboard, after which he says that the sea will become calm again. They however are reluctant to take this kind of drastic action; but when the storm becomes even more violent, they finally agree to be rid of him by throwing him into the raging waters below.

Now, *'the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights,'* (see *Jonah 1:17*) allowing him plenty of time to think about what he has done, and then to pray to the Lord, his God. *"In my distress,"* Jonah says *'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.'* *'To the roots of the mountains, I sank down: the earth beneath barred me in forever.*

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. (See Jonah 2: 2, 6-7)

“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs, but I with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed, I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.” (See Jonah 2:8-9)

Having heard Jonah’s cry for help, the Lord causes the fish to vomit Jonah up onto dry land. God is patient and merciful toward Jonah. But has Jonah truly repented and is he willing to change his mind and go in a different direction Let’s see what happens.

Jonah is again called by the Lord to go to the people of Ninevah, and to proclaim there the message that the Lord will give him. Will Jonah trust fully in the Lord and be obedient to his call? Yes! This time Jonah obeys the word of the Lord and goes to Ninevah for three days. On the first day he proclaims: “Forty more days and the city will be overturned.’ We are told that in response to Jonah’s message, the Ninevites declare a fast and repent in sackcloth and ashes. More than that – their king joins with them in kneeling in sackcloth and ashes in the dust. He then issues a very stern proclamation to his people: ‘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.’ He urges the people to give up their evil ways and their violent behaviour. “Who knows?’ he says. ‘God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.’

Jonah’s obedience to the call this second time, it seems, results in the people of Ninevah changing their ways and repenting, and in God forgiving them and having compassion on them.

However, Jonah’s heart attitude still needs to change. Jonah is less than pleased by this result! He does not think that the Assyrians deserve God’s mercy. He wants them to suffer. For the next two days, Jonah continues to be angry at God and to seemingly consider that he, Jonah knows better and has the right to judge the people of Ninevah for their past offences. Jonah makes himself a shelter, outside and to the east of the city, in order to see just what would happen. God, recognising the tough condition Jonah is being subjected to, causes a vine to grow up and provide shade and shelter for him, which pleases Jonah greatly. But then in the morning a worm appears and begins to chew the vine causing it to wither away. Also, the scorching heat of the easterly wind burning down on Jonah causes him to feel faint and to become thoroughly depressed, even to the extent of wishing that he were dead.

However, once again God intervenes, and Jonah is challenged to change his attitude, his mindset, to stop feeling sorry for himself and to think more of others needs than his own. The Lord speaks to him, saying: *'You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?'*

We hope that Jonah has had a change of heart, but we are not told any more.

In the Gospel reading today once again it is God who initiates the action of the in breaking kingdom of God, and people who are called to respond. God's timing is perfect. Jesus has presumably been listening to his Father in heaven, for we are told repeatedly in the Gospel accounts that he only does what his Father tells him to do. On the previous Sundays of this season of the Epiphany we have heard how Simeon and Anna waiting prayerfully in the temple, were able to welcome the long-awaited Messiah, recognising him in the person of a tiny babe; and this had occurred after the wise men had come from the east to worship the newborn king and present to him their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. We have heard of John's baptism of repentance and his announcing of the one coming after him, the thongs of whose sandals he was unworthy to untie. Then Jesus himself has been baptised by John in the River Jordan, and has seen the Spirit descending on him like a dove and has heard a voice from heaven saying: *"you are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

So now, after John has been put in prison, Jesus begins his ministry by coming and proclaiming the good news of God in this way: *"The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"* God's action requires a positive response from people. Jesus appears as a teacher and prophet, who will go from village to village throughout the Judean countryside calling people to repentance and urging them to believe the good news of the kingdom, this kingdom that is near; but Jesus is also coming as one who will be recognised by some as their long-awaited Messiah, as their rightful King. Here, at the outset of his ministry he calls first Simon and Andrew to leave their fishing nets and then come and follow him. He tells them that in future they will be trained by him to fish for men, in other words to bring people into his kingdom and disciple them. He goes a little further along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee and sees two more fishermen in a boat, James, and John the sons of Zebedee, who are busy preparing their nets for fishing. We are told

that “*without delay*” he calls them, and they like Simon and Andrew immediately leave their nets. James and John leave their father in the boat along with other hired crew, and then all four of these fishermen, having been called by Jesus, it seems willingly change the direction of their lives. Minds made up, they decide to follow him. In turning away from what they have previously known and done, they let go of the security of the employment they have had; they also move away from the closeknit bonds of family and work relationships into a new dimension of relationships, as they learn what it is to be ‘fishers of men,’ in and through Jesus Christ. They will learn that when they let Jesus show the way, when he leads, their discipleship will be a model for others to follow, but when they (like Jonah) think they know better than God, they will be working in opposition to Jesus’ kingdom, the kingdom of light. You might remember when Peter and the other disciples are asked by Jesus, ‘*But who do you say that I am?*’ Peter will say, ‘*you are the Christ, the son of the living God;*’ but then in the next breath will be trying to persuade Jesus to turn away from going to Jerusalem, when Jesus knows that it is his Father’s will for him to go there at this time. And so, Jesus will need to rebuke Peter and say: ‘*Get thee behind me Satan!*’ It is no easy path, this path of faithful discipleship.

In Conclusion:

How do we respond to the scriptures we have heard this morning? “*The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.*”

Where might we be needing to change direction, or to allow our mindset to be challenged and the attitude of our hearts to be softened?

Will we willingly accept Jesus’ leadership and come under his rule and reign as king? Remember that we can ask for the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, as the king of this new inbreaking kingdom invites all who hear him to respond. It is a kingdom where miracles occur, where people may experience healings and deliverance, where all are welcomed. We too, as Ian our Vicar has said a number of times from up front, are called to *follow* Jesus, to listen to him through his word and to learn from his example what it is to be faithful and faith filled disciples.