

3rd Sunday after Epiphany 22 January 2012

Jonah

Jonah is one of the wonderful short stories in the Bible - it is only two pages long and is very carefully written - no need for judicious editing of any sort. It is packed full of questions and action. It is divided into two acts - chapters 1 & 2 deal with God's call to Jonah, his disobedience and the consequences. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with his obedience and his sulk when things turn out as he expects but not as how he wants. I want to tell the story and draw out some themes because I think it is highly relevant for us as we open ourselves to God's guidance and construct a mission plan for the parish.

It starts with Jonah being sent by God to pronounce judgement on the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria (present northern Iraq) and in the 8th century BCE was the hub of an empire that covered much of the Middle East. By the time this book was written Nineveh was in ruins but was still symbolic of the wickedness of the time. The Assyrians worshipped a war god and kings had to make war every year. If you surrendered without a fight you paid tribute. If you resisted your city was destroyed, leaders were impaled outside the city walls having been literally flayed alive and everyone else was taken and resettled elsewhere. You can see why they were feared and why they were seen as wicked. Jonah is sent to pronounce judgement. Instead of doing what he was told Jonah tries to run away to Tarshish in Spain. The ship is hardly out of harbour when God sends a storm which puts the ship in danger. Everyone prays to their God except Jonah who is asleep. The captain wakes him and tells him to pray. The sailors want to know who is to blame for the storm and cast lots and the lots fall on Jonah. He is asked who he is and he tells them that he is a Hebrew, servant of the creator of the universe. They already know he is fleeing God. They ask '*what shall we do with you so that the sea might calm down.*' Jonah replies that they should chuck him overboard. It is quite a statement because it tells us a couple of things - he would rather die than do what God wants. But also he is playing into the blame game that leads to the expulsion of a victim. This has overtones with what happens with Jesus much later; but only overtones. After trying to row back to shore unsuccessfully the sailors throw him overboard and the sea calms. The sailors are filled with awe and worship. Jonah is swallowed by a large fish which God provides and he is there for three days and nights - something that also had overtones for the Gospel writers. Supposedly this is the end of Jonah.

Chapter 2 is a prayer from the depths of Jonah's soul as well as in the depth of his circumstances which are death or like death. There is repentance expressed and faith in God's deliverance. The fish spews him onto dry land.

Chapter 3 starts with the same instruction as Jonah got in the beginning. I find this fascinating. It is as if God brings us back to the very thing we have tried to duck. We see this in our own lives as we find ourselves in a difficult situation in one place. We decide to leave but wonder of wonders we are confronted with the same issue in the next place. You can't escape it. Parker Palmer, a teacher and leader and Quaker tells a story out of his own life with this theme. About mid life he goes on an Outward Bound Course. Part of the way through the thing he dreads most happens - he is roped up and told to go backwards down a 100 foot cliff. His first few feet are painful because he hasn't yet learned to do the counterintuitive thing and lean back. Once he learns that he inches his way down. Halfway down the instructor below tells him he better have a look to see what is below his feet. Very slowly and with trepidation he looks and to his horror discovers that the cliff is about to hollow out and he freezes. After some time the instructor asks if anything is the matter. He replies in a squeaky voice which he says he would deny if there had not been twelve witnesses - 'I don't want to talk about it.' The instructor replies, 'Parker Let me tell you what the motto of Outward Bound is.' He thinks 'Here am I about to die and she talking about mottos.' The instructor says 'The motto of outward Bound is "If you can't get out of it get into it."' Parker Palmer talks about this being The Word made Flesh - huge enlightenment - and he gets into it and the lesson is important as he deals with episodes of depression later in life and rides the monsters down to the bottom.

Jonah can't get out of it so he gets into it. He does a great job - the people from king to animals repent in sackcloth and ashes. And God relents.

It sounds like it is all now OK but it very much isn't. Jonah sulks because God has relented and complains in prayer saying he would rather die and God asks whether it is right for Jonah to be angry under the circumstances. Jonah has been obedient but he hasn't fully changed in himself. There is more that needs to change inside him. Jonah waits outside the city to see what is going to happen. It is hot; there is a sultry east wind, presumably like the one we have been experiencing this week. God causes a plant to grow up and give Jonah some shade. But it gets attacked by a worm and dies and Jonah again says 'it is better for me to die than to live.' God's question about Jonah's right to be angry then

gets more pointed. 'Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?' Jonah says - 'yes angry enough to die.' God's reply opens up perspective: 'you are concerned about a bush for which you did not labour and which you did not grow. It came to being in a night and died in a night. Should I,' says God, 'not be more concerned about Nineveh and its 120,000 people who are ignorant and also be concerned about the animals?'

The story ends at this point unanswered by Jonah because this is really a question for us. As one commentator has put it: *I wonder how many of us, if we are honest, believe that we have the right to say who will receive or not receive God's love and compassion.*

http://www.oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au/2009/Jan/Epih3Jon3_09.htm

This is an important message for us in our daily lives. And it is important for us as a community of faith as we open ourselves to God's guidance about our parish mission plan. What if we find ourselves confronted by people who we do not believe are worthy recipients of God's love and compassion? What if God takes us out of our comfort zone? What if we find a belief challenged like Jonah did? At the beginning of the service book you will find a couple of short excerpts from a book by Mike Breen and Dan Absalom. One describes Missional Communities. In Sheffield where these rather informal groups started to form they found themselves involved with all sorts of people - teenagers and parents, parents with babies, people who like the park, wealthy neighbourhood, ethnic groups, but also refugees, a dangerous gang and its leaders. Some we might see as easy to become involved with; others.....? People join missional communities that meet a need they see.

I am raising the possibility here not to put you off, but to point to the fact that we may well be taken out of our comfort zones as we redevelop this parish. We may well find that a belief we have may be challenged. We may well find ourselves in Jonah's position, being called by God to do something you would rather die than do, or in Parker Palmer's place of freezing on a cliff face. This may well be the place where we learn for the first time or for the umpteenth time that if you can't get out of it get into it.