

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 6 JUNE 2014
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Jonah 2; Acts 9: 1-19a

“From the Deep”

Last week we heard the first part of the story about the prophet Jonah and how he, while running away from the face of the Lord, kept going down until he was finally gobbled up by a big fish.

We heard how Jonah was commanded by God to go to the big metropolis Nineveh, and give witness to God's grace, and call the people of Nineveh to repent and change their wicked ways. We also heard that Jonah thought he knew better, and did not want to go to Nineveh, but embarked on a completely different journey instead. Down Jonah went, to Joppah, to a ship, down inside a ship, down in a deep sleep, and finally, after the Lord threw a major storm at him, down into the sea, down into the belly of the fish.

So here he is, about as deep as he can go, in the belly of a fish, in the depths of the sea, which was, at the time, considered synonymous with the realm of death.

Today, in chapter 2, we hear Jonah speak from the inside of the fish, where he prays. In his prayers, he weaves words from the psalms together with his own, as happens more often in scripture.

In the same way, old and familiar hymns will come to our minds when things get difficult and life is hard. The words of the psalms are imagined to flow into Jonah's mind, in the darkness of the belly of the fish. Words, fragments, sentences, shreds of memory, all woven together into a prayer from the deep.

The prayer starts with thanksgiving, like many psalms do: “I called and he answered me.” It is as if finding the words to pray and restore the connection with God is more important than the rescue from the dire circumstances Jonah finds himself in. As if finding the words to pray and the openness of heart to seek God's presence is answer enough to any desperate prayer, even before desperate circumstances are alleviated.

And often this is true. It can be very difficult to start praying from the deep. In the deep, it can be difficult to turn to God, especially when you know you had a hand in what has happened to you. It is difficult to turn around to anyone and say: ‘Look I'm sorry, I was wrong, I made a mess of it, and look at me now....I need your help’.

Jonah prays, “You cast me in the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me, all your waves and your billows passed over me.” Then I said: “I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?” Being driven away from the sight of God, not being able to see the temple anymore, to have lost the contact with God, is what bothers him most.

Of course, he himself has fled from God. However, it's only now it seems, in the belly of the fish, gobbled up, at the mercy of forces beyond his control, behind doors he can't open himself, that Jonah realises what it means to be really out of God's sight, away from the land of the living. And he tells us exactly how that feels: “The waters closed over me, the deep surrounded me, the weeds wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains, down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever..”

To the roots of the mountains: One can't go much deeper than that. The bars of the earth closed upon me forever.....

Remember: Jonah is a story, the story of a pious prophet who doesn't want to travel in the direction God wants him to go. The story of a resisting, rebellious human being who doesn't want to share God's grace with his enemies. The story of Israel and the Church on her journey through this world with the commission to preach God's love and grace. A story about us, our journey and how we react to God's call to us.

This is what may sometimes happen: Going down, away from God, we end up in deep trouble. Deeper than where mountains have their roots. Outside life, because life without God is, in the end, not life at all. Bound by the bonds of death, imprisoned in darkness, waves passing over us, water closing over us, feeling we've dropped out of God's hands.

And there, in the pit, in the deep, with life slipping away from him, and as far away from God as anyone can possibly be, Jonah finds his way back to God. When despair is at its deepest, the connection with God gets re-established. The cry from the deep is heard, and God is there, even though for a moment we may have thought ourselves truly out of reach, to show that even there he can come and liberate, come and bring us back to the surface in answer to our call.

"You have brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God, as my life was ebbing away....."

Three days Jonah spends in the fish, in the underworld, in death, before the Lord answers his call and his relationship with God is restored. In biblical language, three days in the realms of death is another way of saying that you are absolutely and undoubtedly very dead. That the darkness has had time to solidify around you and every memory of light is, by now, completely gone. Three days is also the time when salvation is close, when there is a now or never quality about despair. The deepest despair paradoxically brings the hope of salvation closer for those who manage to hang on to their faith in such a situation.

I don't know if you've ever been in the belly of the fish, but if you have, you will probably recognise the feeling. Beyond despair where words for prayer fail, or at best come stuttering to the surface from God knows where. Life proves to be a thin thread holding on to you with surprising tenacity.

A despair we also find in Acts with Saul, who has left for Damascus full of murderous thoughts and violence, and ends up blind and helpless at the mercy of one of the very people he set out to harm. Like Jonah, he was zealously heading in the wrong direction, not wanting to listen to God's voice. He is not turned around by a storm, but by a megavolt beam of light from heaven and a voice asking: "Saul, what are you doing?" Here is another person who thought he was wiser than God, then he was brought to his senses.

Both Jonah and Saul are men with a vocation, touched by the Word of God. Both are called to go and speak God's Word to the world. Both are heading in the wrong direction to start with. Both experience God turning them around.

And maybe at this stage you think: it would be lovely to be put on track like that. To hear a voice and see the light, and clearly and without any doubt, know where I should go and what I should do.

Don't be mistaken.

Both Jonah and Saul end up in the deepest darkness after God tells them "up to here and no further". A full 3 days and 3 nights of fasting, praying, remembering, seeking and despair before they finally find their way to the Lord. 3 days in a realm where life has stopped and death and darkness reigns, 3 days before they are brought up from the pit, Jonah with the weeds still wound around his head, the bonds of death still there, Saul with scales on his eyes. Again and again the Bible testifies to the fact that being called is no picnic, it is hard work that demands everything.

3 days and 3 nights, Jonah and Saul fast and pray and seek to establish contact with the divine. Both seem changed after those 3 days. And again we hear the Easter story between the lines. Jonah and Saul are raised to new life, they have changed. Their old life, their old beliefs, the old ways have had to go. In Christ,

they conquer themselves and conquer what it is in them that resists God's calling. And both are raised like Christ is raised, brought up from the pit as he is, brought up into the light from the darkness of death.

For Saul, after this, there are another 13 years of study in the desert. 13 years of reflection and consideration before he has integrated this earth-shattering event in his life in such a way that he is equipped to bring Christ's gospel to the world.

We will have to wait and see what Jonah has learned. At the end of his prayer there is a bit of irony there to make us wonder.... Jonah promises to sacrifice what he has vowed. But he doesn't vow anything pertaining to Nineveh and/or his calling..... We will have to wait and see what Jonah will do..... especially when we take into account the verb that is used to describe what the fish does to Jonah: He vomits him up on the beach. Apparently the prophet, in all his pious praying and cautious promising, is not very palatable to the fish.....

There is one more figure that deserves our attention in the stories we read today. An inconspicuous figure who doesn't share the turbulent and spectacular lives of faith of Jonah and Saul. It is Ananias, a man held in high esteem by the Christian Community of Damascus. A man of deep integrity, trustworthy, sensible, and wholly dedicated to God. In him, we meet true faith, much more so than in Jonah or Saul. He also receives a call, a call to go to find his enemy and bring him light and healing; to lay his hands upon him and give him a blessing. Ananias talks it over with God, because he wants to make sure he heard right. But once he's established that this is what God wants from him, he goes and calls Paul his brother. Ananias, the obedient, travels without too much comment across to what, to him, must have been as bad as Nineveh was to Jonah. He baptises Paul and welcomes him into the community, without condition or provision, and shares a meal with him.

We've met 3 men with a vocation today: Jonah, Saul and Ananias. 3 men who go about their call in three different ways. Saul turns around and becomes Paul. Ananias goes obediently where God wants him to go and brings light, life and community to someone who may have played a part in the persecution of some of his loved ones, and celebrates baptism and communion with this man that came to Damascus with murder in his heart. About Jonah, we are not really sure yet. In the deep, psalms surfaced and prayer made its way up to heaven. He is put back on his feet again, back on dry land, to once again receive the call to go to Nineveh. But we'll have to wait and see what happens next....

And of course this poses the question: Which road do we travel, as people of faith? Are we stuck in the past like Saul, who really thought he was doing the right thing, but was prepared to turn around? Or are we like Jonah: finding our way to God in time of difficulty, but not really prepared to commit ourselves to God's causes?

Or are we like Ananias, who in piety and obedience, does God's will and brings light, life and blessing into the darkness of his worst enemy? Our answer is important. But it is not all important. Because both the stories tell us that God is there also, all the time trying to get us on the right track. And that he keeps loving us, even if we totter off in the wrong direction.

We are expected to at least try and listen though, and go where he wants us to go, and bring light and life to those around us. Even to those who, at first instance, are not in our books. Amen.