

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**  
**SUNDAY 29 JUNE 2014**  
**Rev. Anneke Oppewal**  
**Book of Jonah**



**“Jonah and the Church”**

**Introduction:**

Over the last couple of weeks, we have read from the book of Jonah. We’ve discovered how this story about a wayward prophet, who struggles with obedience and acceptance of God’s ways (and remember, it is a story and not history!), holds up a mirror for all people of faith.

We’ve seen God respond with patience and gentle humour when it came to keeping his prophet on track. We’ve heard about outsiders who understood God’s call and God’s ways faster, and acted on that understanding in a much more effective way than Jonah, supposedly the man of God, in spite of all his piety. And last, but not least, we have seen Jonah struggle to come to terms with the extent of God’s love and compassion for the world. Where Nineveh, in Jonah’s eyes, deserves to pay a high price for its evil ways, in the end, pious Jonah proves to be harder to convert and in more need of reform than the evil Ninevites!

A great story, and I think most, if not all of us, have enjoyed reading it over the last couple of weeks.

But!

I wonder if we, while we were so enjoying this wonderful, humorous story, have reflected enough on how this story applies to us, here and now, in North Balwyn. And have we thought that it might be fruitful, although perhaps a bit unsettling here and there (especially because we have an AGM after the service today), to return to the story and take another good look in the mirror it holds up for people of faith, like us.

Turn our attention inwards, and see what God, through this story, might be saying to us. Where we might be like Jonah, and what we might do to improve our own response to God’s call and God’s purposes for our lives, individually and collectively.

**Chapter 1** tells us how Jonah was called by God to go in one direction, but decides to go off in the opposite direction. Instead of going up to Nineveh, he embarks on a downward journey that will see not only him, but others as well, end up in deep trouble. He boards a ship, a storm is unleashed, and while the sailors try all they can to limit the damage, Jonah closes his eyes and descends into a deep sleep.

The sailors, innocent bystanders who have nothing to do with Jonah’s disobedience, then find themselves forced to make the morally objectionable decision to throw Jonah overboard. Feeling bad about this choice, they beg for God’s mercy in a way that we will not see pious, self-righteous Jonah do at any time.

Do you recognise yourself in Jonah? I do! Have you ever travelled in the wrong direction and got others in trouble because of the wrong choices you made? Have you ever closed your eyes to the trouble your behaviour was causing others? Have you ever been in the position Jonah’s behaviour forces the sailors into? Have you had to make difficult decisions because someone else has messed up? And did you feel terrible because of it?

*Discussion*

I see glimmers of this part of the story reflected in the Uniting our Future process as it played out in the last year. I am sure that nobody set out to create the mess we ended up with. But a storm was unleashed and some very unpleasant decisions had to be made by people who had nothing to do with the initial mistakes that were made. Some closed their eyes to what was happening, hoping the storm would blow over, while others struggled to keep the ship afloat, well aware that they were in danger of going down with all hands.

And once the Church woke up and realised the ship was about to sink, people were blamed and pushed overboard, in another, frantic attempt to save the ship. And the blaming, the pushing overboard to save the ship, did not always happen with the same careful and prayerful resistance the sailors on Jonah's boat displayed when they came to the conclusion this was the only way forward.

Chapter 1 invites us to recognise that we are all like Jonah at times, individually and collectively. Going off in the wrong direction, and landing ourselves and others in trouble because of it. We may also recognise ourselves in the sailors: finding ourselves in heavy weather because of mistakes others have made; struggling to keep the ship afloat; and ending up playing the blame game and pushing others overboard, willingly or unwillingly.

Gloomy? Not really. The story tells us that somewhere in all of that, God is still at work. By the end of Chapter 1, the fish has already been commissioned, the storm dies down, and everyone is on their way again.

## **Chapter 2**

Here we find Jonah in the belly of the fish. On the internet, I found these funny pictures showing Jonah completely at ease in the fish. Television, drinks, reading, writing, he doesn't seem in any hurry to get out.

And as I reflected on this chapter, I realised it sometimes is like that. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know. We often spend time living lives that aren't what they could be, ignoring our call, ignoring the less than ideal circumstances we've ended up in, praying piously, singing the odd song and forgetting about the world out there that is waiting for us to live life as God intended us to.

### *Discussion*

If I look at the Church, I wonder if that isn't sometimes where we are, in the belly of the fish. We are well aware that the situation is not ideal, but comfortable enough. Singing hymns about God's saving Grace, like Jonah does in the belly of the whale, but happy enough to leave it at that. With not much of a desire or even an inclination to find our way to the surface and see how the world out there is doing and how God might want to see us actively engaged with it.

It's not Jonah that eventually finds his way back to the surface, it is the fish that vomits him out. Sometimes it is like that. Sometimes we need a kick in the backside before we get moving again. Which makes me wonder: Could the whole crisis of decline the Church finds itself in at the moment be God's way to get us out of the belly of the fish, where we've made ourselves too comfortable, back on the world stage to play our part and share our experience of God's grace and mercy in other ways, and in different places, than we have thus far imagined as right and proper?

## **Chapter 3**

Here, the pious Jonah finally obeys God's call. But his heart doesn't seem to be entirely in it. One day and five words is all he is prepared to spend. A minimum effort. Nevertheless, with even that minimum effort, God manages to accomplish a maximum result. The whole city turns around.

I find comfort in that, as well as challenge. The turning around of the world is not proportional to the effort we put in. The salvation of the world does not depend on us.

But Jonah could have put a bit more in, couldn't he? Quantitatively as well as qualitatively. And that, once again, confronts us with the question of how much we put in, and to what extent what we put in reflects God's love and mercy. Are the words we offer, the actions we take, God-directed and God-oriented? Or is it all about us, about our self-righteous conviction that we know how to set the world right?

At the moment, in some parts of our Church, there is a silent "pray first, preach and act later" movement developing.

And it makes me wonder: If Jonah had prayed before he entered Nineveh, if he had allowed himself to have a real heart to heart with God, would he have acted, would he have spoken differently? What do you think?

Is the "pray first, preach and act later" response perhaps something that might be worth taking up in our lives, in our Church? Or are we so cynical about what difference prayer, talking and listening to God may do for us, that we feel we might as well get on with what we think is, to us, obviously right straight away?

*Discussion*

#### **Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 is perhaps the most confronting chapter of all for Church people. Pious Jonah, who dutifully builds his booth to celebrate the feast of tabernacles at the appropriate time, convinced he is showing the world what true piety is.

In the meantime, he closes himself off from where the real God action is happening. He keeps his distance from Nineveh, convinced he knows better than God what true faith looks like.

And I wonder, if that isn't what is sometimes happening to us. That our traditions, our ways of doing Church, our conviction that we know what true faith should really look, feel and taste like, gets in the way between us and the miracle-working presence of God.

Leaving us outside, away from the action, while we are convinced that we are on the inside. Angry about the worms God sends to nibble at our certainties.

*Discussion*

We'll be talking strategy in our AGM meeting today. And I think, reflecting on Jonah, there are a couple of things we might want to prayerfully consider.

Are we listening? Or have we, each individually, and perhaps even as a group, already made up our mind about what we think is the right way forward? How Church is "done", what true faith looks like?

Are we prepared to leave room for a God that may be asking to go somewhere that we ourselves would never have thought of going?

Might we be settling down for a twilight existence of pious prayer and beautiful hymn singing, but not much else, while God is trying his best to get us out of our rut and onto a path that might lead us to much more exciting shores?

Are we prepared to let go of prejudice and convictions about what, in our eyes, is right and proper, and explore what God might have to say about it? Are we prepared to allow for the fact that God may be doing new things differently, out there and out here?

Jonah doesn't want to change. While Nineveh is finding a new way forward, he is outside, in his booth, doing worship as he's always done, waiting for the sun to rise. Is that where we will end up? Amen.