

# Jonah

Love, faith, justice and obedience.



(Image: John August Swanson)

North Balwyn Uniting Church,  
Rev. Anneke Oppewal,  
May-June 2014

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH SUNDAY 25 MAY 2014

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Jonah 1; Matthew 5: 13-16

“God is Calling”

A whale of a story, this story is about a reluctant prophet, a persistent God, and a wicked city surrounded by wild and unpredictable seas that is inhabited by big fish and other wonderful creatures.

A story: We all know that the throat of a whale does not allow for anything much bigger than a herring. We also know that it is quite impossible for any fish to travel around the African continent, through the Persian gulf, up the Tigris into northern Iraq in three days. This is not, and has never been meant to be, a historical narrative. It is a story, and a very comical one, that belongs with the prophetic books of the Bible; books that seek to teach us about behaviour, about right and wrong, and the consequences of what we do; books that hold up a mirror to show us who we are and how we should behave.

From the very beginning of the book, we find every word is full of meaning, symbolism and reference. The name Jonah means dove. And the dove, in scripture, often stands for the Spirit of God and for God's people, be it Israel or the Church. So even before we have started reading, the title tells us that what we may expect is a book about the works of the Spirit and about God's people.

The opening lines are magnificent and when we translate a little bit closer to the Hebrew, this shows up even better: "The word of the Lord happened to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying....."

The word of God "happens". It's not something that is just spoken or heard, it is something that happens, that puts things into motion, as it has done from the very beginning of creation.

And it happens to Jonah, the dove, a human being connected to God by Spirit, which breathes in him. He is called, and is shown clear direction by God himself. I don't know if you've had such moments in your life. Moments where you "knew" there was a divine imperative and you felt "called" to do something or go somewhere. I have, and it's awesome when it happens. But it can also be totally inconvenient.

"Go to Nineveh and preach to her". And Jonah gets up, and prepares to go. Of course: what else could he do? God himself has spoken!

Jonah gets up.

But not to go to Nineveh.

He flees, to Tarshish. A trip to Nineveh was just the last thing he wanted to do! And some of us may recognise that too. I do!

Knowing what you should be doing, and heading off in the opposite direction nonetheless, usually because for some reason or other, what God is asking you doesn't fit in with your own plans or with your view of the world.

Full of humour, the text tells us what happens next:

From here on, Jonah goes down. First he travels down to the sea, the most foreign and hostile element there is to any Palestinian land dweller at the time. Then he travels down to Joppa, the biggest seaport in the country, down to a ship, down onto the ship, down into the hold of the ship, down into a deep, deep sleep and later, down into the sea, down into the big fish.

From here on, it's downhill all the way for Jonah until the fish delivers him where he should have gone in the first place.

And why? Why does Jonah go to such great lengths to get away? Later it will become clear, that it is not fear for the awesomeness of his call, or of him being daunted by the size of the city, or the extent of its perpetrations. His flight is inspired by resistance. Resistance against God's loving grace. Jonah doesn't want God's love extended to Nineveh, he doesn't want the city saved. Those people are outside his comfort zone and he doesn't want them entering into it. They're the enemy!

I am sure that would never happen to any of us, would it? If God told us to go and extend his love and grace to someone we perceive as not being in our camp, we would have no trouble at all doing that, would we? We don't harbour grudges, we don't nurture negative feelings against anybody. We are Christians, and Christ has shown us not to!

If only!

Jonah, God's carrier pigeon, who was to become a peace dove, flies in the other direction because he, with all his limited insight, deems it better. He thinks that he has to protect God from his own generosity.

The Lord then throws a huge wind upon the sea. At the time, the sea was thought to be a place fairly remote from God's immediate presence, and there is a good chance that Jonah went to sea because of that. But even here, God manages to find him; the obeying wind and waves in sharp contrast with the stubborn resistance of the prophet.

A storm rises. In scripture, this is often a sign that something is not quite going according to plan: Jonah is going the wrong way and something has to be done to get him back on track again.

And Jonah? Jonah sleeps a deep sleep. He closes his eyes for the signs. He feels safe in his sleep, hidden deep down in the hold of the ship.

And I just wonder sometimes if that could be happening to us: Snoring away in the hold of our ship, blissfully ignorant and feeling quite safe, while outside God is desperately trying to wake us up by beating against the ship's skin.

Could this be what is happening to the Church? Could this be us? Are we turning in like Jonah, turning away from the daring and challenging demands of God in our time and world? Turning away from the world outside, not ready to extend God's generosity and ability to love to what we deem foreign and/or unlovable? Turning away from what is foreign to us and challenging our ideas of what is right and wrong, and the values we and our fathers and mothers before us have always upheld? Is there a chance that we are, even a little bit, like Jonah? People who often know better than God where the ship of our lives, the ship of the Church should be heading?

Jonah holds up a mirror for us, and asks us what we would do when God calls. He asks if there are any directions we would hesitate to take, even if we felt God directed us there.

What shape does being the light and salt in the world take in our lives? And is there anywhere where it has lost its strength and direction because we find it difficult to get out of our limited mind frames?

Jonah is asleep in the innards of the ship, closing his eyes and ears to what God would want him to do.

What is the matter with you? You hard sleeper! The captain, responsible for the wellbeing of the ship and its crew, turns up at Jonah's bedside. All hands have been called on deck, every imaginable measure has been taken to safeguard the ship and nothing has made any difference. And finally, it is now every man to his own God. A massive SOS is sent up to heaven by all concerned to any god that may be up there listening. A shipload of gentiles, a small Nineveh is what Jonah has ended up with, and they ask him to pray to the God he is trying to run away from.

Perhaps your God will help, says the captain....

Another mirror moment I recognise, and you may recognise it too: being asked to pray by people who you thought were a lot less into the faith than you are, to discover to your embarrassment that their faith is actually a lot deeper than yours.....

Whose fault is it? The captain asks awkward questions from his heathen perspective. The gods have to have a reason for this terrible storm and if there is a scapegoat, he or she should be punished! He is not far wrong this heathen, there is a reason for this storm. It is no punishment however, but a sign: where one stubbornly keeps going in the wrong direction, a whole community is put at risk. Where one moves in the wrong direction, others often have to bear the consequences. And the whole community gets tainted by the sins of one.

Lots are drawn, another heathen way utilised to determine the direction the gods want taken. And even this ungodly instrument proves to be under the control of the living God: Jonah gets the draw, and there, for just a moment, he shows himself as the prophet he is meant to be: He testifies of his God who has made the sea and the dry land and everything in it and confesses his sins. Great fear immediately overcomes the mariners. For them, a couple of words are enough to understand the awesomeness of this God. They are a lot quicker in that respect than Jonah, who believed he could withstand this God. And again, it is the people from the outside who seem to understand a lot more about God than those who are supposed to be on the inside.

What next? How can the danger this little community at sea finds itself in be averted?

"Throw me overboard" says Jonah, "that will most surely stop the storm." Cut the rot out! Jonah will, a bit further on in the story, full of malicious delight, wait for the destruction of Nineveh. Not so the heathen sailors on the boat! They recoil in horror from sacrificing another human being to save their own skins. They wait until the very last moment before they resort to those kinds of desperate measures and they accompany them with prayers and adjurations.

Once again Jonah goes down, he descends into the deepest deep. Why doesn't he ask the skipper to turn around and head for Nineveh? Or could this be his last attempt to not go where God wants him to go? The sea in scripture is as good as synonymous with the realm of death. It's where Leviathan lives, the big beast that gobbles up anything alive. It's hell's gate, the place where God cannot reach. Does Jonah choose death over listening and going to Nineveh?

Who knows?

His sacrifice works for those on board the ship. The sea quiets down immediately, her anger against this little vessel gone, so it can resume its journey. And again we read about awed worship of the Lord, promises and sacrifices made. With only a few words, has Jonah managed to convert this small Nineveh, made it familiar with the greatness of God and brought it to worship?

The big Nineveh remains!

God keeps pursuing Jonah with his calling. And whoever has had that experience of call, of deep and certain knowledge of what you have to be or do, will know that there is no escape.

You cannot get away from it, it keeps following you, and you will keep bumping into it until you give in. That goes too for the Church community. It has been called to live out the gospel, but all too often it has turned away. It has ignored God's directions and followed her own. A lot of the tempests that have troubled the world have come from that; war, injustice, violence, poverty and harm, the people of the church often descending into a state of altered consciousness similar to sleep. Ignoring the storms they were causing, refusing to see and read the signs of destruction caused by her resistance to God's will. Time and time again, however, she has also been put back on track, to testify to the living God even without wanting to or meaning to. Have things happened that brought her back to her calling, to what God wanted of her in weird and roundabout ways?

God does not let go of Jonah, as he does not let go of his people, as he does not let go of us. It is not the Leviathan, the all-devouring sea monster, that comes to eat Jonah. Instead,

a big fish commanded by God comes to gobble Jonah up, to enable him to fulfil his calling and still go to that big city that is in bad need of his preaching.

Jonah is inside the fish for three days and three nights....

We finish chapter one with an Easter story, three days and three nights in deepest darkness, inside the fish, inside the sea, inside the realms of death. Suddenly we see the image of another showing through, with Jonah reluctantly playing his part.

How wonderful is that? The story tells us that God does not let go, even if we deliberately try to thwart the course he has set out for us. God persists, and despite of, and sometimes even through our disobedience and resistance, God still works miracles. But it does make it easier for him if we just follow where he led us and stop thinking we know better than God. Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH SUNDAY 6 JUNE 2014

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

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.



## NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

Sermon 15 June 2015

Rev Anneke Oppewal

Jonah 3, Psalm 90, Ephesians 3: 6-21

'One more step'

Two chapters in, and it looks like we are back to square one in the story of Jonah. Again, we are told, the Word of the Lord happens to Jonah: "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

So far it seems, there has only been delay. Jonah hasn't even started with what God called him to do at the beginning of the book. The people in Nineveh are still in the dark, no word of God and his will has reached them yet. And not for want of trying on God's behalf! On the contrary. It is his prophet Jonah, the dove, carrier pigeon chosen to convey God's word to Nineveh who has taken a circuitous route and has been plain obstructive in the implementation of the task God has charged him with. With the sea weed still around his head he has been pulled up from the deep, put back on his two feet and told again: "Get up and go to Nineveh".

Sound familiar? How many times do you think God, through all our contrariness, pig headedness, and unhelpful obstruction, fails to get us to do as God asks? How often does God have to start over with us, from the beginning, to get us to do what he wants us to do or be where he wants us to be?

"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Go, tell them Jonah!

And wouldn't we be justified in expecting an extraordinary, wonderful sermon now, after all that's happened?

A man who has just experienced God's faithful, merciful response to his own transgressions, bringing him back from the path of disobedience he himself had chosen to go down? A man who has just surfaced after three days in utter darkness, in the belly of a big fish, buried under an ocean of death and destruction? Who could be better suited to tell others about the goodness of God and the possibility of new life to be received from God's hands?

If ever, here is a man suited to tell a great and evil city what has happened to him when he choose to turn his back on God's commandments, and drowned in disobedience and pride. How he was saved, how his life was turned around, how immense God's compassion, God's patience with him proved to be.....

Perhaps we're not entirely back to square one. After Jonah received God's command and decided to walk away, a lot has happened! Jonah has been born again, has been turned around, has found himself pulled from the deep and put back on track, heading in the right direction.

Remember that beautiful psalm he composed in the belly of the big fish, about God's faithfulness and saving power? Eloquent, poetic, full of exquisite turns of phrase, and references to God's Word as he himself knows it from scripture! Surely we can be excited by the prospect of a sermon that will further build and expand on that? A all the more profound sermon informed by his own, recent, experience?

“And”, the text says, “Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, three days walk across”. Yes, that’s right, three days to walk from one end of the city to the other. Say New York, or London, or Mumbai, or Rio de Janeiro. A city like so many in the world. Large, teeming, full of life, filled with evil, full of crying shame.

Jonah starts to enter the city. And he cries out: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” He starts, but then he stops.

Jonah! You can’t be serious! Is that all! What are you doing! Five words! And not even half way in!

Jonah doesn’t venture far. One day journey in, Jonah stops and stays on the periphery. The same number of days Jonah spent in the fish, is now used to designate the size of the city. Three days walk across, is this woeful city, with the crying shame of its sin reaching all the way up to heaven.

Three days, Jonah, better than anybody else, should know that it is possible, with God’s help, to get to the other end of that. But no, Jonah is only prepared to dip a toe into this immeasurable depth: one day’s journey.

He doesn’t take any trouble to get to know the people of Nineveh, he doesn’t talk to them, he doesn’t, like a messianic figure should, take their well being to heart. He does not, like Abraham did for Sodom, stand up and beg God to spare them. He does not, like Jesus, offer to stand in for them, and take their sin upon himself so they can live.

Jonah doesn’t even take the trouble of making the name of his God known to this city, nor does he come clean about his own past and need for mercy and salvation. He doesn’t mention a possible change of direction, or hope of redemption and salvation.

He doesn’t speak, like Paul to the Ephesians, about his own weakness, and the miracle of grace he himself has experienced. A short, acrid exhortation, fire and brimstone, is what Jonah delivers. Not a word of grace.

Only as far as Jonah himself can see does Jonah prophesy: If you continue like this you will be going to the dogs in no time. If you continue like this there is no hope for you, no life, no future.

And might we, at this point, not recognise ourselves in Jonah? Too often where we speak, where the Church comes up against sin, against injustice, against the crying shame of a world lost in brokenness, our own fragility, our own weakness and fallibility is kept out of sight, while we carry on about the fallibility and fragility of others.

Too often are we tempted to present God as a threat, as the big closer, the bogeyman who will come and punish, rather than the God of love, of hope, of new beginnings and miraculous grace and mercy who keeps the future open even for the worst of sinners.

How many of us lack in enthusiasm and dedication where it comes to proclaiming God’s compassionate love to the world? Go to Church every Sunday without expecting anything more than the comfortable feeling that we’ve done our duty and believe God should be grateful for us dipping our toes in? How many of us are prepared to take on the sin of this world, how many of us are prepared to venture deeply into whatever it is that ails the world

around us and travel its breadth and width to shine God's light on it, to get involved in turning things around? To speak of God's mercy passionately, eloquently, poetically and compassionately?

Too often we do exactly as Jonah does: not expecting any change, we tend to give up before we have even started. The pain and suffering of this world often so overwhelming that we stay at the periphery, crying shame, but hesitant to enter into it, actively and positively engage with it, because we find it difficult to believe that God's grace could save the world from something that goes so deep and so far that we can't see how there could ever be an end to it.

The story of Jonah tells us that the impossible is possible. That miracles happen. With or without us. The people of Nineveh turn around, turn away from violence and death. They stop violating each other and the world they inhabit and they cry out to God for mercy.

Jonah's prophesy comes true, but in a different way than he had anticipated. Jonah, God's prophet, in spite of himself, has spoken God's truth without intending to do so.

"Another 40 days and Nineveh will be turned upside down" he said. And it is turned upside down, just not in the way he expected it to be. Everything in the city, people, animals, young and old, big and small, they turn from darkness to light, from evil to righteousness.

The forty days are not the count down to disaster, but forty days of reflection, of sobering up and coming to their senses, forty days of learning a new way of life, a new way of being in the world. Forty days in the wilderness, like Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, like Elijah, like Moses, like Jesus, like the Church does every year in lent, spend forty days to focus, to reflect on their ministry, to find their core, to learn, to practice a different way of life, a different way of being to take root. Fasting and covered in sackcloth and ashes Nineveh turns around towards God. They turn away from violence, from evil, from destruction and death. Suddenly another story begins to shine through in this miserable place, the messianic story where shame and death are converted into hope, faith and new life.

It is a conversion from the bottom up that happens. In this does Nineveh turn itself upside down as well. Before word reaches the king, it travels the width and breadth of the city. From the periphery where Jonah has given his sparse message, the Word carries itself around the city until it reaches the halls of power.

And then even the King shows he's got the message. He changes from a powerful King of an exceedingly great and evil city into a servant of his people who lays down his crown.

Here again the future figure of the Messiah shines through: The king of Nineveh becomes a King without glory who shows his people the way to a different future. His clear and detailed instructions are in stark contrast with the five words Jonah uttered earlier on, showing that here is someone who's been touched by God and is prepared to act on it.

We become aware that this big, bad metropolis consists of people, big and small, young and old, and even animals, who are precious in God's sight. Individuals worth loving, who are capable of compassion and care, of growth in insight of conversion and change. An anonymous mass starts to break up into separate bodies, faces, characters, people. People who decide to let go of the violence, the inhumanity, the injustice that has been the

hall mark of their society, people who put a faithful appeal in to God, in hope of mercy, love, and compassion.

Who knows! God might change God's mind, God might turn around and let go of his anger.

The people of Nineveh have understood more of the gospel than Jonah is prepared to proclaim to them. They put their faith in a God who relents, who listens, who is prepared to offer those who are prepared to change their ways a new start, who can be moved to change his resolve.

And God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, and God changed his mind about the calamity that God had said would come upon them; and God did not do it.

God sees what they do, and how they turn away from their evil ways. He sees how the violence, the inhumanity of their society is changed. And God turns towards them, in love, and makes peace with them.

And so God calls us, like the people of Nineveh, with the words of the apostle Paul: Change is possible, don't lose hope. In the power of the Holy Spirit, with growing faith and trust, rooted in God's love you can work on a different world, a different order.

Like Jonah we are people who have experienced God's love and mercy in our lives, have emerged from the waters of baptism, carry the songs of God's grace and mercy in our hearts, people who share bread and wine at the table of the Lord. Like Jonah we are people who may, after choosing to turn away from God, have found ourselves pulled up from the deep, saved from inside the belly of the fish and brought back to life.

God calls us to let that show, to let it radiate, to let it penetrate the world, and proclaim that there is a God who so loves the world that he will do anything to save it. That there is a God who is prepared to enter into your world of darkness and despair and stand up for you, even stand in for you to take on the forces of evil and bring change, hope, life and light.

Go, believing that nothing is impossible. Go, and carry God's grace into the world, be generous, be outrageous in your faith, even where the odds seem to be overwhelmingly against you. Go in faith, proclaiming the Word, sharing of your own experience that God's love is at work, bringing healing, peace, and justice. Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH REFUGEE SUNDAY, UNITING CHURCH  
BIRTHDAY SUNDAY 22 JUNE 2014  
Rev. Anneke Oppewal  
Jonah 4; Johannes 3: 16-21  
“God’s Appointing”

So far, God has been through quite a lot with Jonah. First, there was the call to go to Nineveh. Then there was flight, a downward movement, away from the direction God had indicated. Instead of Eastwards, he goes Westwards, toward Tarsish and not towards Nineveh. On the way, while Jonah has descended into a deep sleep, a storm is thrown upon the sea to get him to move in the right direction. Then Jonah is thrown overboard and a big fish, commissioned by God, gobbles him up. For three days and three nights, Jonah stays in the fish and there, in the deep, he composes a splendid psalm, praising God for his patience and power for salvation, crying for help in this most desperate of situations. The fish puts Jonah ashore on a beach very close to Nineveh, and for a second time he receives the call to go to Nineveh. This time he goes, and obeys God's command to go and preach to the city. But only with the most minimal of effort. Jonah doesn't go any further than is absolutely necessary, and his sermon is only one short sentence: Nineveh will be turned upside down in forty days! His prophecy comes true but in a different way than he expected. The people of Nineveh do turn around and repent of their wicked ways. From low to high, even the king, everybody joins in the effort to turn God around in his decision to destroy the city. The city turns to God and is saved.

Time for celebration and thanksgiving, one would say! What else is there that needs to be told? This is a fantastic outcome for the prophet (his words have had effect), for the city (that isn't destroyed) and for God (who loves his people). Mission accomplished with a 100% positive result. And Jonah? He's been awkward and obstructive all along! If it hadn't been for him, we would have got to this point a lot quicker and with a lot fewer complications!

Perhaps it is good to remember at this point in the story what Jonah is really about. It is not a story about someone we can ridicule from a distance or feel irritated by: some stupid prophet from a long gone past. Jonah means dove. And the dove is the symbol of Israel and the church. The story of Jonah is a parable about God's people, God's faithful, about us. The book of Jonah is not primarily about the salvation of Nineveh, although it may seem that way on the surface. It is first and foremost a story about God's mercy and love. Love and mercy for a world where the cry of evil and violence reaches up to heaven, and injustice and oppression are rife. And God's call, and the response to God's call of the pious and faithful are in the middle of that.

That's why it is not enough to tell of the conversion and salvation through God's great mercy of Nineveh. Because the story does not finish there, there is a fourth and last chapter necessary: Nineveh has turned around, but not Jonah!

We discover at the beginning of chapter four that Jonah is angry, more than angry, he is white blazing mad! The text doesn't tell us exactly why but, knowing our own pious and faithful souls, it is probably one of the following: Jonah may have been angry because of the amazing effect of his message. He may not be trusting their sudden change of mind. Or we may think of the story of the prodigal son where the oldest and more pious is angry at the return of the youngest. The good and obedient son is angry because his younger brother, who has wasted his life and heritage, is received by the father with open arms. Jealousy may have come into it, or a feeling that this is all too easy, or ..... well, you know how it feels when you've been good and pious and faithful and someone who hasn't seems to get off too easily!

Does Jonah think God is too soft on the Ninevites? Does he not approve when the guilty (and be sure they were guilty in Nineveh, their wickedness reached all the way up to heaven) aren't punished appropriately but receive free and full grace, just like that? Or is Jonah angry with God? Angry because he feels God is not reliable, does not keep his word and does not root out evil as promised? Blazing mad because God is capable of revision, of turning around and allows himself the freedom to be merciful on whoever he wants to? Even if they clearly do not deserve it? Or is it his pride that is getting in the way? Now his prophecy, to his mind, does not come true.

Whatever it is that has Jonah seething with rage, by the time we catch up with him, he has left the city. He has turned his back on her before getting too involved, closing his eyes to what happens after he has delivered his message. One day there and back, and Jonah becomes a tourist waiting on the side of the road to see the disaster happen.

He builds a little shack, a booth, just like his people build for the feast of tabernacles or sukkoth. It looks like pious Jonah settles down to celebrate the feast of tabernacles that Israel celebrated to remember the journey through the desert. The feast immediately after Yom Kippur, a day of atonement and repentance, the holiest day of the year for Jewish people. A feast to remember God's great mercy and love and his ability to save, even from the darkest depths of guilt and shame. A feast where a simple shack is built and everybody lives outside for 7 days as a symbol that God's people are still on a journey open to anybody who wants to join them on their way to the promised land.

Jonah settles down on the east side of the city where the sun comes up. But he isn't waiting for the light to shine in the darkness of Nineveh, he is waiting for cataclysmic events about to unfold and he is not happy!

Listen to him pray:

Didn't I tell you! This is why I fled to Tarsish! Because I knew you are merciful and full of love, I knew you are compassionate and ready to forgive, I knew you repent from evil. Now take my soul and let me die, because it is better to me than life.

Jonah complains, a legitimate way of prayer in scripture. He approaches God with questions and protests. In itself there is no issue with that, except that this prayer of Jonah makes painfully clear what has been going on all along: Jonah does not call on God's promises, God's grace and mercy. Jonah's complaint is not about God not keeping his word and being the good God he has promised to be, it is a prayer directed against God's goodness and love. Using words of Moses, of the prophets, of songs designed for praise, Jonah turns against God because he just can't accept that God's promises, his mercy and love are also for those outside, for others who Jonah thinks don't deserve this goodness. Years ago I saw a documentary on drug addicts; it showed parents that welcomed their children back, again and again, to be betrayed and hurt, again and again. And how brothers and sisters would get blazing mad at times because of the damage they saw done to their parents, again and again. Brothers and sisters who, to protect their parents from their own goodness, would lock the door .....

This is how Jonah presents his reluctance to go to Nineveh. He has tried to protect God. He has tried to protect God against his own compassion, from being too soft.

But where parents will, at times, really need protection against their softheartedness, God doesn't. And who is Jonah to complain anyway? Doesn't Jonah remember his previous prayer from the inside of the belly of the whale? Doesn't he remember how his disobedience was met with the same mercy and loving embrace the Ninevites now experience? Did he himself not get a new chance and new start in life?

What shows up here is where the pious often get it wrong. Not applying to others what God has applied to them. Expecting punishment for others for mistakes they themselves have made. Being totally blind to their own failings while making a big fuss about the failings of others. It's not God that is important to Jonah, it is his own pride that makes him react the way he does.

He would rather die than live with Nineveh in the dawn of God's salvation! The Ninevites are not welcome in Jonah's shack and heaven, and neither is God! Jonah doesn't want a God who puts love before justice. Jonah does not complain in his prayer about evil, he complains about salvation. He prefers the darkness of destruction over the light of God's grace.

And then God opens his mouth. He let Jonah have his say and has allowed him to pour out all his anger and frustration, but then it's enough: Is it right for you to be so angry, Jonah? God brings divine humour into play to also bring Jonah to repentance and turn him around.

He commissions a miracle tree, a bush so Jonah is in the shade. A tree to take the heat off Jonah in his shack and give him the opportunity to cool down a bit. A bush that symbolises the shelter of God's blessing for people to find solace. Perhaps another encounter with God's free grace will teach Jonah to rejoice in God's goodness.

But no, Jonah is very happy with this miracle tree, but he remains self-centred and doesn't understand the hint God is giving him. Even though his anger eases a bit, there still isn't room for joy about the salvation of Nineveh.

Then God takes his hinting one gentle step further. He commissions a worm, a worm that starts gnawing away at Jonah's joy about the tree in the same way Jonah is gnawing away at the joy God feels about the change of heart of this city. And of course: the source of joy withers. A hot and sultry wind starts to blow and now Jonah really notices what it is like to be without God's wonderful shade. His shack does not give him enough protection. The sun beams down mercilessly on his head, God's blessing is withdrawn to make him see, to help him understand! And indeed, Jonah discovers that life is no life outside God's goodness and mercy.

And again, there is the same question from God: Is it right for you to be so angry, Jonah? Of course, he says, of course I am right! I have a right!

And again the Lord speaks: You weep over this miracle tree you didn't do anything about to make it grow. It was a gift of a night and it was taken away in a night. You cry because of something that just happened to be there. Something that wasn't yours to start with and you didn't put any effort into. Would I then not weep over Nineveh, that big city with all the children, animals, people and livestock that is in it? My creation?

It is moving to see how God tries to explain to Jonah. How God shows his heart: his love for that big city, the city that is part of his creation, a city that is his.

The story does not tell us if Jonah did understand, the story has an open ending, an ending open to us.

Do we rejoice because God has not destroyed the wicked, but gives them another chance? Can we live with the fact that we, who consider ourselves the faithful, are not the good guys with a right to God's goodness, but people called by God to share what we receive from his goodness with the world? Do we want a church like a shack: Open to all sides, welcoming everybody, generous with food and drink for anybody on the journey?

The Uniting Church has a reputation for speaking prophetically in a world where the clamour of violence and evil continue to reach up to heaven. It is good at calling the world to account and laying bare what is wrong with it. But how often does it stop to look at itself? Is it too easy at times to lose ourselves in the injustices and pain of the world outside the Church and forget what might be happening inside it?

We, as a congregation, are supporting the Bethel centre for the healing of abuse in our Church, and I, as your minister, am on the council. The Bethel centre supports those who are dealing with violence and injustice in our Church.

I am also on the pastoral relations committee, appointed to look after ministers and congregation in our Presbytery. And it is frightening and scary to hear of what goes wrong in our Church. How prejudice, power struggles, pride and violence wreak havoc among people who profess to be committed to living the gospel. We are big on speaking up for



refugees and pleading with the authorities for asylum seekers, advocating for the poor and the vulnerable, bringing to the surface some of the great injustices our country is involved in, and we can be justifiably proud of that.

But what are we like when it comes to addressing violence that may be happening in our own ranks? How are we when it comes to welcoming the stranger, the person that does not fit in with or take on faith, our way of thinking, people from different ethnic backgrounds, maybe, whose take on faith may be very different from ours? How accessible are we for people with disabilities to exercise their ministry? How passionate are we about getting involved with those we feel need to turn around?

Are we not like Jonah, at least some of the time? Running a mile when God asks us to commit ourselves, to get involved in work that clashes with our prejudices, and may not, at first instance, appeal to our sense of justice and pride? Are we not like Jonah, praying beautiful prayers when the going gets tough, but forgetting about God's grace the minute we feel we are back on solid ground again? Do we put more in than the minimum of effort if it comes to turning the world around? Do we dip more than a toe in when it comes to engaging in the lives of people who may be alien to us? Do we use piety, participation in Sunday worship, even, as an excuse to sit and watch and become outside observers of the world going by?

What does it mean to us if we realise that the message of the book of Jonah is not first and foremost about putting Nineveh, putting the world right, but that it is more about putting us, putting the people of God, the Church, right. Is it inviting us to take a good look in the mirror and wonder how we, in our life and faith, may be like Jonah? Does it unsettle us? The book holds up a mirror to anyone who is too absorbed in their own piety and faith. It holds up a mirror to us, calling us to look beyond the Church's door, not to point the finger at whatever is wrong out there, but to pay attention to what God may be doing in the world, right now, that may teach us a lesson or two about our own way of being, our faith, our understanding of what God is really about.

Let's try and see if we can do better than Jonah, if we can discover the places where our lives and faith need turning around. Let's try and become true doves who bring the message of God's compassion and love to the world with passionate generosity, integrity and care. Let's be prepared to love outrageously and with abandon, living the gospel recklessly, while letting go of any superficial, self-serving piety we may still possess. All the while conscious that we, like everybody else, are dependent on the grace and mercy of God, and will receive it if we turn his way. Amen.

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH SUNDAY 29 JUNE 2014

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Book of Jonah

“Jonah and the Church”

A discussion

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.