

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 22 JANUARY 2012

Rev. Ivan Poole

Jonah 3: 1-5,10; Psalm 62: 5-12; Mark1: 14-20

“Them and Us”

What if you got to heaven and found that God had decided to let everybody in? How would you feel about that? Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Liberals, Labor, even Collingwood supporters. Everybody! How would you feel? I remember at a Bible study I was involved in, we discussed this view point.

I’m not sure. My first reaction would be, ‘Hey wait a minute. This is against all that I believed and preached about. What’s going on here?’

This in a way was Jonah’s problem.

Most people know something of the story of Jonah from the Old Testament. They know that God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh, but Jonah did not want to go, and, in fact, took off in the exact opposite direction to Tarshish. Then there was the storm at sea, Jonah getting tossed overboard and being swallowed by a big fish. Finally being vomited up on shore, precisely back where he started from. And then he went off to Nineveh as directed in the first place..

The book of Jonah is only 48 verses long and I have often wondered why it is included in the Bible at all. And yet in those 48 verses we get an expansive vision of God. In our second Bible reading today from chapter 3 of Jonah, we read of the successful ministry of Jonah in Nineveh.

When I was at university I took a course in Sociology and one of the words I learnt was ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is, in non-sociologist terms, the tendency of humans to organise the whole world around themselves, as if our little corner of the universe was the whole universe. I and my people were the centre of everything.

Today’s lesson from Jonah could be interpreted as an attack upon ethnocentrism.

God gives Jonah a mission, ‘cry out against Nineveh’ (1:2) Jonah is to tell Nineveh that her days are numbered, that in a short time the city will be overthrown.

Considering the sins of great, powerful, arrogant Nineveh this divine decree comes as no surprise. Their sins are not enumerated in detail except to say that their sin is ‘violence’, what some commentators have interpreted as ‘abusive exploitation that the strong work against the weak’.

The response of the Ninevites is surprising. They believed in God. Even though Jonah expected no response, the response is specific and dramatic in that they took to sackcloth and ashes and repented greatly.

As I read this story one of the questions that arises is that which I mentioned before, why is this story included in the Bible? What was God doing concerning himself with the pagan Ninevites anyway? Why be concerned about their sin and the fate of their city? Why go to all the trouble to send one of the prophets to speak words of doom to them?

Can it be that Israel meant what it said when it prayed the Shema, the great prayer of Israel, ‘Hear O

Israel the Lord our God, is one.'
Could it be that our God is their God too!

What a great story!

Nineveh was to the northeast of Israel. Jonah took off to Tarshish, though we don't know exactly where it was, possibly over towards the west, towards present day Spain. The end of the world! God comes to Jonah saying, 'Go over to Nineveh and preach.' Jonah hops a ship in the opposite direction, getting as much water between him and Nineveh as possible.

Although we can initially understand why Jonah wouldn't want to go to Nineveh, a city that was violent, yet it is puzzling when God gave him the command, 'Cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' You'd think he would jump at the chance to have a go at the Ninevites. Jonah later explains that he refused to go to Nineveh because he was afraid that it might work! That is, for all he knew, the Ninevites might listen and repent and God would forgive them and then where would we be? With us as the good guys and those violent, sinful Ninevites as the bad guys, well, you know, we know where we stand? We are the goodies!

So Jonah gets on a boat to go where God is not. Which leads to what is the only episode of the story of Jonah we all know anything about. That Jonah is tossed overboard and is promptly eaten by a big fish. After three days of severe indigestion the big fish vomits Jonah out on dry land in the very place he started from. God comes to Jonah again saying: 'Let's go over this one more time in words of one syllable': 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message I tell you.' So he goes. Jonah goes to the edge of the city, an exceedingly large city so the story goes, and delivers his one-sentence, five word (in Hebrew) sermon, packs his bags and prepares to head home.

What a sermon! no illustrations, no poems, no pithy slogans or alliterations, just, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'

There you are God, satisfied? I preached. It's done.

The response to the world's shortest sermon and possibly the worst, is the greatest in the Bible. The whole city repented. They start fasting and put on sackcloth and scatter ashes on themselves. Even the king, who must have heard the message second hand. Even the cattle repent!

So what does Jonah say now? Is it: 'Well I have always been rather good on my feet, even if I do say so myself.' No. Jonah gets mad, gets depressed, and says he wishes he were dead. 'I knew this would happen!' pouts Jonah. 'This is why I headed off to Tarshish. I knew that you were a God who was merciful, forgiving, a lover of losers like those Ninevites. I knew!'

Now why would this story, this comical, exaggerated joke of a story be told to Israel and to us?

We've all heard this story about Jonah from our youth up, especially about the big fish, probably many times.

So why remind people of such a story? I think the story is a satire. It's about us, about the way we take ourselves and the world we have built far too seriously.

We unmercifully bisect the world into good guys and bad guys in denial that there is one God, rather than many. We have our God, the Ninevites had theirs. We still struggle to understand the message from three thousand years ago: 'Hear O Israel, The lord our God, is Lord alone.'

We are surprised to find our God working on the other side of the street. Down on the beach, at the football or even in the pub! We divide the world into them and us, their god and ours and forget

that 'the lord your God is one.'

Jesus tried to teach us. He told a story we love to hear about a father waiting for the return of his prodigal son. We take great delight that the father waits upon, receives, and restores the wayward son. But remember how the story ends? Not with the father inside the house, partying with the once wayward but now penitent younger brother. The story ends with God standing out in the dark, earnestly pleading with the older brother. God loves both.

'Hear, O Israel, the lord our God is one.'

Because God was with the Ninevites, we can take heart knowing that because he is their God he can be our God too. When Jesus invited Judas to the table, we are invited also.

Isn't it peculiar that we divide the world into them and us. It's almost as if we need an enemy out there to unite us, someone we can all hate. Against this propensity of ours to divide up the world between us and them, friends and enemies, Israel hurled this playful tale of Jonah. If God manages to care even for the Ninevites, to find a place for them, then we can cling to the expansive mercy of God as well.

And when, and if, we get to heaven we might be surprised to find who is there. It's not our decision, it's God's. All we need to do is be faithful to our call and remember that there is a wideness in God's mercy.

Hear O Israel; The lord our God is one alone.