

Third Sunday after Epiphany. January 21, 2018. The challenge of Jonah.

On the banks of the Tigris River, in north western Iraq lies the city of oil rich Mosul. Sadly Mosul has been in the news in recent years because of the activities of ISIS and the terrible destruction there. Close by, in ancient times, was the capital of Assyria, in the city known in the Bible as Nineveh. It was a great city. Sennacherib chose what was a moderate sized trading town as his capital in 700BC and built extensively, including a grand palace with over 80 rooms lined with sculptures. His grandson, Ashurbanipal, extended the great city and added an extensive library. The city itself was surrounded by four other great walled and fortified cities. This 'greater Nineveh' fits well the description we find in the book of Jonah.

Assyria was one of the hated enemies of the people of Israel and Judah. In 2 Kings 18:13-14 we read of the destruction of the Judean town of Lachish by Sennacherib and the way that King Hezekiah was made a vassal of the Assyrian King. But in 612BC the Assyrian Empire was defeated and the entire city of Nineveh was destroyed. It was razed so completely that it was only rediscovered in the 19th century, the site marked by two large mounds and some of the remains of the city walls. When the site was excavated the remains of the library of Ashurbanipal were discovered along with remnants of the carved relief decorations from the palace. Amazingly one of these carved reliefs depicted the destruction of Lachish by Sennacherib.

In other places in the Bible when we read about Sennacherib and Assyria there is an overflowing hatred expressed against this nation. The book of the prophet Nahum is almost exclusively taken up with prophetic denunciations against the city of Nineveh and its rulers. Its ruin and utter desolation are foretold (Nahum 1:14; 3:19, etc.). Its end was to be strange, sudden, tragic. (Nahum 2:6-11) According to Isaiah the destruction of Nineveh was God's doing, his judgement on Assyria's pride (Isaiah 10:5-19). Zephaniah also (2:13-15) predicts its destruction along with the fall of the empire of which it was the capital.

In the New Testament Nineveh is mentioned as an example of people who heard God's message and responded with repentance (Matthew 12:41 and Luke 11:32). Just as the people there, then, responded to Jonah the people around Jesus are being encouraged to respond to Him and to His message. It was a useful example to quote to make the point which Jesus was emphasising but outside of the book of Jonah we find no other evidence that the people of Nineveh ever actually heard a message calling them to obedience to God, nor that they responded and became faithful to God. On the contrary the evidence suggests that they remained worshippers of the Babylonian Ishtar (or Ishtar), the goddess of love, fertility, nature, sex and war.

The book of Jonah is a hopeful story of what might have been, could have been, should have been, but not an historical account of events which actually happened. So, what is the use of the book? The focus of the book is not really on the way that the Ninevites responded but it is more a reflection on the character of Jonah and his response. These hated enemies could not really be expected to hear God's invitation and respond, so there would have been a lot of sympathy for Jonah's attempts to escape the task. Yet, even when faced with a task in which he did not believe and which he believed was hopeless, pointless, God expected Jonah to be faithful and obedient. There was no getting away.

Yet, in the story, the people of Nineveh did respond. That was our reading today (Jonah 3:1-10). Do you remember what happens next in the story? Jonah throws a tantrum. He was shocked and disturbed. He couldn't believe that these awful people actually responded to what he said. And even more Jonah couldn't believe that God would actually forgive these terrible, wicked people. Jonah felt betrayed because God acted in ways which were outside of his expectations. Firstly that happened when he was presented with the 'offer' which he tried so desperately to refuse. Jonah felt betrayed because God was asking of him something he didn't feel inclined to give. Then Jonah felt betrayed because God acted in ways which were more merciful and forgiving than Jonah wanted him to act. "Blow them away! Destroy them! They were terrible to us – be terrible to them!!" But God was not as petty and limited as Jonah wanted God to be.

Part of the wonderful richness of the Bible is found in its surprisingly subversive stories. The drama of the book of Job is a challenge to ideas commonly held about right and wrong and why bad things may happen to good people. The delightful book of Ruth insidiously challenges the purity of David's ancestry and so challenges the prejudices of the pious. Jonah challenges ideas about how God does or should act. All three of these stories call us to recognise that we usually don't have a good 'handle' on our understanding of God – how God acts and what God expects of us. They challenge us to think more deeply.

We like to think that we can box God, contain God, limit the call that God has on our lives. We do that in many ways. We do that limiting of God when we look for a list of rules to follow and think that life is about just observing the standards, doing the 'right thing'. We do that limiting of God also when we see God only as a part within ourselves which encourages us to fulfil the potential which exists within us.

God is greater than our imagining, even greater than our dreaming. God is greater than our fears and our hopes. God's desire for us is not limited by our desire for ourselves, nor is God's perspective on each of us limited by our own perception of ourselves!

One of the lessons of the story of Jonah is the encouragement to reflect on how we react when we hear a message which we do not want to hear, how we react when we are presented with something which challenges either our views, our expectations or our comfort zone? The two classic responses to challenging situations are 'flight' and 'fight'. Jonah tried to flee. Many people do, yet however far we may run if we are committed to living life to the full then we come to a point where we need to face the questions and challenges which disturb us rather than running away from them.

For many people the 'fight' response is woven with denial. That happens also in lots of ways. One is to label a view with which we disagree as 'radical', 'liberal', 'conservative', 'reactionary' or even 'fundamentalist' and so find an excuse to dismiss it without real engagement with the disturbing ideas presented. Another approach is to criticise the speaker or the method of delivery as if that somehow negated the message. These can be very convenient ways of escaping from being confronted by those messages which get under our skin.

When we feel affronted by something which is said to us or asked of us one of the important questions to ask is 'why?' Why does this disturb us? What is it about our own pre-conceptions, expectations or prejudices which is being threatened here? If something rattles our cage – why is that part of us being rattled? That is a more creative response than many people often make. It is a more creative response than Jonah made. He fought and resisted and then he sulked when life and God and other people were not as he had conceived of them to be.

In a sermon I heard a few years ago a friend of mine was speaking about mission. He quoted a suggestion from a mission strategy author called John Piper, who said that those who are not passionate and zealous about mission are being disobedient to God. It is strong language, but essentially I would say that I agree. What is intriguing for me is how disturbing that suggestion is and why it gets under our skin. I suspect that part of the reason we find that idea disturbing is the suggestion that God does have expectations of us, along with the dis-ease which comes when we begin to be open to the idea that God's desire for us may move us out of our comfort zones. Few of us like being challenged in that way and so we react.

The 'dirty word' is actually 'obedience' and I have come back to it because that is really the heart of the story of Jonah. It is a story about obedience. Obedience is not ever really about going through the motions of doing what we are told. It is never really about 'obeying' submissively and doing simply and immediately what we are told to do. There is a richer invitation here.

It is the challenge which comes when we open our minds and wills to God who is greater than us, God who does have expectations of us. Yet these expectations, hopes and desires of God are experienced as hopes and dreams which lead us and those around us into richer and deeper living, more connected and vital living, more authentic existence within and engaged in community – embracing of life which is less isolated and more whole.

The obedience to which Jonah was called was not just to do what he was told. It was to let go of his prejudices and to acknowledge that God saw and invited involvement in life out of a bigger picture than Jonah was able to see at the time. That was the invitation offered to the readers of the story of Jonah. It is the invitation which is offered to us also.

So, when we are disturbed and uncomfortable at what we hear and experience as we seek to engage with God and one another in community we are invited to find a more creative response than either disengagement, fight, flight, denial or ignoring what challenges us. We are invited to be faithful, to be faithful to God. That faithfulness begins when we ask "God, what are You saying to me here, in this?" Faithfulness is not a 'once off' commitment but it is a lifelong pattern of engagement. And an essential part of that engagement is the openness to the idea that the idea which scares the pants off us, the invitation which pushes all our protective and reactive buttons may actually be God speaking to us from a perspective on our lives which we have not yet seen.

'God's ways are not our ways, nor are God's thoughts our thoughts.' Obedience begins with a commitment to listening more deeply than we may naturally do. The story of Jonah is a reminder that the best way of serving God may well be outside of our comfort zone, something unexpected! Avoidance is not a great option. Let Jonah's story speak to you today.

Amen.

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