

Reluctant Disciples?

Sunday September 24th 2017 St John the Evangelist, Cambridge

Jonah 3: 10 - end of 4

Philippians 1: 21- end

Matthew 20: 1- 16

This morning we heard of Jonah and his reluctant relationship with God.

On one reading it is hard not to see the humour. It's rather as if Jonah is a sulky teenager - not that I know any, but rather our popular idea of one.

We all remember that Jonah is the one who is saved from drowning by being swallowed by the whale. Most importantly Jonah is a Prophet. He is probably the world's most reluctant Prophet. He is a Prophet and prophesying is his business. Except he just really doesn't fancy it.

God calls Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and call out its wickedness. Instead of doing exactly that he seems to say, "*Oh yeah?*" and runs away, and jumps on a ship going the opposite direction. God sends a storm, during which Jonah goes to bed instead of helping, then gets the blame for the storm and is chucked overboard. Cue the whale.

Jonah, contrite, does a lot of praying "inside the big fish" and his prayers are answered and he is "spewed out" upon the dry land.

But he hasn't quite learnt his lesson, this rather immature Prophet, because when he is called a second time he goes but with very bad grace [*Alright, I'm going, keep your hair on*]. It was a long way to Nineveh, three day's walk, but Jonah has only gone a day and starts crying out, "*Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown*". It's las if this teenager has been told to tidy the bedroom, who then slams the door and immediately starts tidying up very noisily and calling out, "*I'm tidying my bedroom, like you said, here I am, tidying my bedroom, tidying, I'm tidying my bedroom ..*" [*Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown / I'm tidying my bedroom ... and so on.*]

Jonah's prophecy however works immediately. He has only gone a day and the people and King of Nineveh are terrified and start repenting wholesale with the full sackcloth and ashes Works. It is, as one Commentator described, "the shortest prophetic oracle on record."

God spares Nineveh - and now Jonah is miffed. Why have they been saved so easily [- *its not fair!*]? Jonah says *what did you need me for? You were always going to spare them - told you so!* And he goes out of the City and builds a shelter and sits down and sulks, says he wants to die - *yeah, whatever* - and waits to see what happens. Then God makes his shelter much nicer by appointing a bush over it - and, a very funny verse: "Jonah was very happy about the bush" [*respect, yeah? That's more like it God!*]

But God takes the bush away the next day and it gets hot and Jonah gets cross and still wants to die [*yeah*] and God tells him in the end that Jonah did nothing to deserve that nice bush and in the same way shouldn't God be concerned about the many people in Nineveh who might have died regardless, just the same. Well the Book ends there, but presumably Jonah grows up a bit, or so I like to think.

So what do we learn from this stroppy Prophet and his adventures?

At some time in our lives, occasionally or frequently, we can feel acutely that we are falling short. We can't but help make comparisons, or feel we are not measuring up. In my most recent experiences going through the Cof E selection processes I found myself at one point wrapped up in what felt like some competitive game of spiritual top trumps - everyone I met had done amazing things for God: all I have done is go to work and please myself. We can all open an eye and think why is everyone else apparently getting something amazing out of this, but I am wondering about what is for dinner. Fortunately we were all told that everyone feels like that.

When we feel inadequate in faith we feel we are not worth as much as other people. Certainly the labourers in the vineyard felt that the late joiners who had not toiled all day under the hot sun were not entitled to the full reward. We can empathise with that very human experience, and we can feel guiltily that somewhere maybe Jonah had a point about the people of Nineveh, though he didn't cope with it very well.

Our Gospel reading, as so often, is counter-cultural. All of that expectation of fair reward for fair labour is turned on its head when it comes to the promise that Jesus makes, that the promise of Jesus is permanently open: here I am, whoever you are, with all of your jumbled thoughts and distractions, doubts and messy lives: here I am. So it is, as has been said, God's grace blows where it will.

What is on offer in God's grace? It is the eternally open promise, the promise of Jesus - of God - that never goes away, whether it is hours, days, months, years or a whole life time - it is always always there, whether you have turned up at the end for five minutes or were queuing overnight to be first in line, it is

always there and we are none of us any better or worse in God's heart for it than anyone else.

John Arlott, the true sage of Cricket once wrote - very reassuringly in my case - that "*all Cricketers are Cricketers, none the less so for not being first class, which is no more than a statistical distinction*". So we could be regarded as the holy equivalent of Joe Root or Ian Botham or Peter May depending on how old you are - or you could be out first ball in a game on a black-sand beach on the wide shore at the edge of the Hebrides - but in our love for the game we all at heart the same. Or as John Bell of the Iona Community puts it: "*Follow the light that you have, and pray for more light.*"

But as much as the the eternal promise is eternally maintained, it is chiefly put into effect in the world around us **by us**. We are called by our faith to be the workers for faith - Jonah was, Paul was, the disciples were, we are.

We here in St Johns are in the midst of our Parish that calls out - as we know from our experiences of Prayer 48, **calls out** for a wider and open and new or first time relationship with God. Our roots are deep, but our walls must come down. We can be unconfident, reluctant, like Jonah; we can be as committed and energised as Paul writing in prison of his joyful exhortation of God; but we need to share - this is the "necessary privilege" of discipleship, as Paul puts it.

Few people are brave enough to go to a party uninvited - it is we who can make the invitations - quietly, in our own way, but nonetheless, we can try, remembering that all of us feel too sometimes that we are not good enough or committed enough, or know enough scripture to come. **We** are the **reciprocal** means of that reassurance to those who feel just that too. **We** can provide the reassure that no prior qualifications or expertise are required, but just a little, tiny light glowing in the dark, that nagging, itching, doubting, asking, wanting, curiosity as to where seeing may lead - possibly to believing. "*Follow the light that you have, and pray for more light.*"

Paul warns us that being a disciple is hard. He tells the Philippians not to be intimidated. He knows all too well that they will be ridiculed and be in physical peril. For Paul it was the Imperial Roman world, for us it is our aggressively secular society that still finds it uniquely acceptable to laugh at, mock or dismiss the Christian Church and Christians. So it takes courage, but have courage, Paul tells the Philippians, Paul tells us, stand side by side, have Faith.

So what we learn is that, tempting though it is to do a Jonah and race off in the opposite direction, we can be reassured that we are only asked to be ourselves in God: no more, no less. It is what Rowan Williams describes as

“the call to be ourselves”. We don't need to be afraid; neither God or anyone else is going to ask us to be or do something that we are not or cannot do. But we can do what we can, however great or small, because it is all of the same high value as if one had toiled for the whole day or for the last ten minutes. As the message of Jonah makes clear, the prophet's task is that of all people: to speak Gods message wherever we are sent.

Shortly the table will be set for the Eucharist, the Communion. There will be an invitation to all on the same terms. There will be food and drink in the bread and wine. We will be invited to meet the living Lord of fact and faith who died to redeem us once and for all, all of us, whoever we are, for all our sins.

We come with our joys and fears and doubts and praise, our griefs, our worries, our regrets, our anger, and our sadness and our inadequacies - to receive nothing more or less than utter love, a love so strong it died for us - Fact. By this gift He only asks that we give him the chance to let Him in.

So let us accept the invitation to come as we are: *Follow the light that you have, and pray for more light*. Receive in the bread and wine that eternally offered gift of Christ that is Christ, the Christ of Fact and Faith, confident and sure of one thing, that there is no such thing as being late to the party.

Amen

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