

Sermon for the Healing Communion, 11th November 2018, Remembrance Sunday

First Reading: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 (page 786)

Second Reading: Hebrews 9: 24-end (NT page 207)

Gospel: Mark 1: 14-20 (NT page 32)

“The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the Good News” Mk 1 v 15

Repent, believe, good news...

These are the themes that straddle our readings this evening.

Jonah, son of Amittai, has been sent to Nineveh with a message.

And it's a message that Jonah did not want to deliver... so much so, that he jumped on a ship heading in the opposite direction, got thrown in the sea by some surprisingly thoughtful and devout sailors and then spent 3 days in the belly of a fish, only to be spewed out on land...

Spewed out in order to deliver the message... a message of dire warning;

“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown...” Jonah 3 v 4

And why didn't Jonah want to deliver the message? Because Nineveh is in Assyria... And the Assyrians were bad news... Seriously bad news... They were the kind of nation that invaded, took prisoners, displaced people and laid siege. They were cruel and violent, exacting bloodthirsty punishment on those who opposed them. Which included Israel. Imagine the worst atrocities that have been carried out during conflicts and you probably get a little insight into the Assyrians...

They're probably Israel's number one enemy; so it's no wonder that Jonah is not very keen on going there!

But eventually he does.

This one Israelite in a nation of war-mongering Assyrians. He goes in and proclaims against them...

And they listen to him...

And they repent...

Just like the fishermen in our gospel today, the response is instant....

In fact, the Assyrians repent so much of their actions that they don sackcloth and ashes! This is a real sign that they realised they've recognised their sins and they are asking for God's mercy. From the greatest to the least, they put on sackcloth; even the animals!

And God sees that they have repented. That they have turned from their evil ways.. And they are forgiven; God has mercy and does not bring about the “calamity that he had said he would bring upon them”.

It's no wonder Jonah is angry, is it?

In fact, in the final chapter of Jonah we hear him complain; “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”¹

And which of us hasn't felt like Jonah sometimes? Sullen and sulky because good stuff is happening to someone we aren't ready to forgive yet...

For anyone on the outside, God behaviour towards the Ninevite is scandalous and naive... How could you possibly spare *those* people.. can't you see what they've done???

Likewise, Jesus' response to sin is scandalous. The message of Jesus' death on the cross *is* foolishness... and yet, it is a foolishness which has been offered for all of us. As we hear in the book of Hebrews; Christ has been offered *once for all* to bear the sins of the many... And whilst we may not all be able to understand how or why the frequent animal sacrifices of the old testament had to be replaced by the single sacrifice of Christ on the cross; I hope we can all agree that it was costly.

This morning we heard;

Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends.²

And the costliness of peace was evident, as we heard the moving list of those who had died.

And, forgiveness is costly too.

As Christians, we *know* that God's forgiveness is open to all. We know that Jesus is ready, not to judge, but to gather up, “to save all those who are eagerly waiting for him”³.

But we can have a pretty hard time accepting that!

We can find it hard to accept it for others... For those, like the Ninevites, for whom sin is very evident. We might be unwilling, or unable, to acknowledge that God forgives those who have hurt us.

¹ Jonah 4.2-3

² John 15.13

³ Hebrews 9.28

But if they truly repent (*and that repentance means truly realising that what you have done is wrong and that it requires change and that it might mean consequences...*)... if they truly repent, then God's forgiveness is given...

And we can also find it hard to accept God's forgiveness for ourselves.. I think we've often too scared to accept the gift grace and mercy from both God and those around us. We put up barriers and we do everything we possibly can to avoid messing up. We justify all our little, everyday mistakes with excuses and explanations. We don't want to admit that what we ultimately need to hear is that we are forgiven.

At times, I think we find it as hard accepting God's forgiveness for ourselves as we do accepting God's forgiveness for others... But that forgiveness is exactly what helps to move us from brokenness towards healing and wholeness..

Repent, believe, good news...

The good news in today's texts is that Jesus has died on the cross and, with his death, our sins are forgiven. There is nothing; no sin, no angry thought, no doubt or question, that can separate us from God's love and the scandalous enormity of God's mercy...

But the challenge is exactly the same. Because that applies to everyone else to. God's redeeming love and mercy is also equally available to our greatest enemy and the person who has hurt us the most...

On this Remembrance Sunday, it seems fitting to leave you with the words of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian, who, along with her sister, opened their home to hide refugees. They were arrested and sent to a concentration camp, where Corrie's sister died. Corrie was able to do what Jonah, and so many of us, find impossibly hard – accept that God's forgiveness was open to all.

She said;

“Even as the angry vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him....Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness....And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on his. When he tells us to love our enemies, he gives along with the command, the love itself.”⁴

So let us hold those words in our hearts.

⁴ From 'The Hiding Place' by Corrie Ten Boom

Let us know God's healing mercy in our own lives

And let us open our eyes to see healing in the world, which comes from that forgiveness to all people.

Amen