**Jonah 3:1-5, 10 & Mark 1:14-20**

How often do we write someone off? How often do we not expect much from them? How often do we disregard people who come from “s…hole” countries. Sorry, I can’t utter the word. Only the President of the free world has the freedom of speech to utter that kind of word. But I hope you understand what I mean. How often do we decide which dictator should be ousted, or taken out by force? Or, which group of people are becoming more and more dangerous to society at large, and must be relegated to the back of the bus?

We have power to harm, to divide, to separate, to denigrate, to scapegoat, to ignore. And it is not just a comment made by President Mr Trump last week about the people of Africa and Haiti, people do that all the time. Nathaniel, one of the disciples of Jesus when first heard that Jesus came from Nazareth quipped in John’s gospel ‘What good can come out of Nazareth?’ Indeed, what good can come out of places like that? What good can come out of Africa and Haiti and Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, North Korea and the list can go on and on.

But an ardent reader of the Bible and a faithful follower of Christ knows all too well that there’s no “s…hole” country or no God-forsaken place or people. All are able to be transformed. As a matter of fact it is from one such place came the Saviour of the world who preached and lived a life of love, friendship, inclusion, peace, reconciliation, and opened a new world and a new way of relating. And he is the one who calls his followers to do the same.

In today’s Old Testament reading we find Jonah faces the same question: ‘What good can come out of Nineveh?’ This is the moral soup in which Jonah swims.

I guess we know people and places close to home that we might say that about or at least think of them in that way and dismiss them. There are people who talk like that when they talk about African or Middle Eastern or Aboriginal people in our cities or some suburbs that appear to be socially deprived.

And yet, God chooses the unlikely to proclaim the good news as has happened throughout human history through men, women, children who are poor and socially unacceptable. The Bible is the greatest testament of this fact. And today we are called to proclaim the good news about building a ‘culture of encounter’ that takes in love of neighbour and love of the enemy and love of the stranger. We are called to ‘fish’ or draw people in as we hear in the Gospel. We are also called to listen. It might mean that those to whom we proclaim the ‘good news’ might actually proclaim the ‘good news’ to us. We are not just those who will ‘fish’ others but from time to time we too will be ‘fished’ by others.

So let’s look at Jonah’s story.

I guess we all remember Jonah’s story from our Sunday school days – the story of the man who was gobbled by a big fish and three days later the fish spat him out. I remember a Sunday school child’s comment: “Surely Jonah didn’t take shower for many days for he stank so foul that even the big fish spat him out.”

Well Jonah’s story is not really a children's story but an adult’s one because it stretches our understanding of God and salvation. It takes God outside our conventional square and challenges our perception about people who are different, people whom we might even consider enemies.

The book of Jonah starts with God’s instruction, "Go to Nineveh, the great city." We hear an echo of this same instruction in today’s reading at chapter 3 verse 1. It’s a standard instruction from God when God calls someone to do a task. And the standard response that follows is, “Here I am Lord!” And people go and do what God asks them to do. But not Jonah.

God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh the great city. But he went down to the port of Joppa; bought a one way ticket and boarded the boat to Tarshish which is diametrically opposite to Nineveh. Jonah’s intention is clear. He wanted to get as far away as possible from God and to the people God was sending him to.

Why would Jonah do that? And that’s a good question for some exploration.

To say Nineveh was a great city is an understatement. At the time of Jonah i.e. about seven centuries before Jesus, Nineveh was the largest city of the Assyrian empire and it was the superpower. It is in present day Iraq. Historically, it was the Assyrians who had overrun the northern kingdom of Israel and destroyed Jonah’s homeland. It was a brutal occupying force that forever changed Israel's fortunes.

So as far as Jonah was concerned, Nineveh was his enemy and all he wanted was Nineveh’s destruction. He wanted revenge. But God wanted him to go there to preach the good news. In today’s world it would be like God asking you to go to the heartland of the ISIS or to Iraq or Iran or Syria or North Korea. I guess now we understand why Jonah headed towards Tarshish and not Nineveh.

But that was not going to happen. We know what happened next. God created a great storm, the ship began to sink, the sailors drew straws in order to find who was responsible for all this bad luck, and eventually, after much tittle-tattle, Jonah was tossed overboard and the storm stopped.

But God wasn’t finished with Jonah. Neither did God abandon his mission for Nineveh. So God summoned a big fish to swallow up Jonah. He was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Does this remind you of anything? Death, burial, resurrection? Anyway, at the end of the three days, during which Jonah prayed for deliverance, God caused the big fish to spew Jonah out on the dry land.

Now here comes the bit we heard today, or most of it. God spoke to Jonah a second time: “Get up, on your feet, and do what I asked you to do in the first place. Go to Nineveh and call the city to repentance.” And this time Jonah did exactly what he was asked to do, no more, no less; to the letter. And it worked. The king ordered that everyone, even the animals, must fast - no food, no water - and must dress in sackcloth, and cry loudly to God for help. He asked his people to repent. And the people listened and repented. And God saved the whole country.

Needless to say, everyone was very happy! Except Jonah! He got really mad. He yelled at God - ‘Didn’t I say this right in the beginning? I knew this was going to happen. That’s why I headed for Tarshish! I knew even then that you would change your mind. You are a gracious and merciful God. You are ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness. If you won’t kill them, then kill me. I’m better off dead!”

See, Jonah was so full of self-righteous indignation that he would rather die than lose face! God asked him why he was so angry, but rather than take the opportunity to deal with his anger, he stomped off out of the city, made himself a little shelter of leafy branches and sat down to have a good sulk.

End of story? No! God still wasn’t finished with Jonah. God understood Jonah’s heartache. So God caused a broad-leafed tree to spring up. It grew over Jonah to cool him off and get him out of his angry sulk. Jonah enjoyed the shade. Life was looking up. But then God sent a worm, and by the next morning the leafy shade had gone. When the sun came up and the hot blustery wind came from the eastern deserts, Jonah again got angry, very angry and prayed to die.

Then God said, “What’s the matter Jonah? Why are you angry? Are you angry because of the shade tree? But what right have you to get angry over this shade tree? You didn’t plant it or care for it, and yet you censure me for changing my feelings about Nineveh from anger to pleasure, this big city of more than one hundred and twenty thousand people and innocent animals?’

With this question ends the story of Jonah. And I believe from this question Jonah got the message. Have we?

You know, although there are few things in the story that I don’t understand, like an adult person gets swallowed by a fish; or animals don sackcloth, and a prophet gets so angry over the death of a bush that he wishes he were dead, I like Jonah’s story because it raises the question of our understanding of God and our discipleship in today’s world.

First and foremost this is a story about God’s outrageous mercy in which not just the chosen Israelites but their most hated enemies, the Ninevites are also included. It was a very steep learning curve for Jonah that God did not share the same prejudices, hates, tastes as he did. Jonah was a ‘Law-abiding’ Israelite but didn’t live in the spirit of the Law. So it was quite a shock to his belief system to discover that God loved the Ninevites, their arch enemies.

Of course, it’s all too easy for us to sit back from our comfortable vantage point and shake our heads at Jonah’s religious egotism. But the fact of the matter is that we too have people we love to hate. In the past the hate list included Adolf Hitler, Emperor Hirohito, Stalin, Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden. And now Bashar Al-Ashad, Kim Jong-Un and many more. We hate many countries calling them axis of evil. And of course in this hate list are included those who come from the “S…hole countries.” This hatred kept Jonah from rejoicing in the miracle of repentance and restoration and does the same for many today. In fact, in Christian faith, we have a place for the people we love to hate—we call it hell. And there are Christians who are all too happy for them to literally go to hell!

And yet, the joyful lesson of this story which comes at this great season of Epiphany is that God is love and this love includes even those we love to hate. No one is so far gone that God’s Spirit cannot bring them to repentance. No one is beyond the scope of God’s mercy and love. My parents taught me that if I did not believe that God would save the foulest of humans, then I did not really believe in God's power to save my own soul. The book of Jonah puts those words into action and demands that everyone who hears it contemplate God's attributes and the meaning and power of salvation.

Yet we think about some people as absolutely incorrigible and unforgivable and we might even justify our “spiritual indignation” towards them. But then we need to remember God was willing to forgive even Assyria. God has the ability to do the incomprehensible, to extend mercy to the least deserving that actually opens the door to our own hope. A friend once remarked that the spiritual gift many Christians seem to possess is the gift of righteous indignation. But Jonah’s story challenges the righteously indignant to put aside their moral superiority and take on the character of God, whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. Cycles of violence and blame can only be broken where mercy is extended. The only way forward for any of us is to demonstrate the same mercy that has been offered to us.

The second lesson from Jonah’s story is that it was not just the people of Nineveh who changed; Jonah too was changed by them. Jonah had a harsh message for them. He wanted to bring down punishment upon them, but it was through them, the Ninevites, the not so nice people, that God touched Jonah’s heart. He was able to see goodness in them and also to see that the God he thought he knew was not really God. Can we be open to seeing God at work when we or others act out of compassion and sensitivity rather than indifference and neglect? Can we see God at work when ordinary people risk their lives for complete strangers?

Christians often see themselves as the sole purveyor of salvation. But there are people who might never call themselves Christians but through their commitment and generosity proclaim the gospel to us in different ways. I see many such people in our cities, in *Mealsplus*, homeless, ex-prisoners, people who are addicted - who we would not give a second glance, how they touch the lives of others in ways that make all the difference. They try not to take advantage of others. They are ready to forgive. They are patient with people who are different or annoying. They refuse to take part in gossip or vilify or engage in sexist or demeaning talk. They share what little they have, and are sensitive to people who are vulnerable or fail to meet the expectations of the majority. When many in the society question, “What good can come from them” they show us much about the importance of sharing, kindness, care and support to one another. Certainly these people can change us as the Ninevites changed Jonah.

Third and final lesson from Jonah’s story is that we don’t have to be angels and saints for God to use us. Jonah was bigoted and hateful, and yet God was able to use him. That’s a great comfort for us, for the whole time in this story God is right in there working with Jonah. He doesn’t sweep Jonah under the carpet, but remains faithful, accomplishing his purpose through Jonah in spite of Jonah’s resistance and ineptitude. Can you see a bit of yourself in Jonah? I can certainly see myself. But isn’t it encouraging to know that God can work his purposes out even in and through people like Jonah and you and me?

God in Jesus came to inaugurate a new kingdom of love and inclusion and he refused to yield to the status quo or to what was comfortable. He acted generously towards the weak, the vulnerable and those ostracized by the society. He worked for peace and reconciliation rather than inflame division and hatred.

And he calls us today to do the same. He calls us go to Nineveh of our time, of our world. Where is our Nineveh today, you might ask? Nineveh is the back-streets and lanes of our cities festering with prostitution, drug and crime. Nineveh is the ivory tower of the corporate establishment where the destinies of the majority of the world are decided without any attention to their interests and welfare. Nineveh is where children and women are sexually abused. Nineveh is where politicians make policies that are reprehensible and inhumane. Nineveh is where hatred and violence towards others are preached and practiced. Nineveh is where those whom we think our enemies live.

Going to Nineveh is not easy. It’s the hardest part of our faith but it is crucial. Jonah was not sent to the people of Israel who were already believers, and neither are we. Jesus calls us to bring the Good News to unimaginable places and impossible situations. And the good news for us is that these hopeless cases are not so hopeless after all, and we need to remember that we are not alone there, Jesus is already a step ahead of us in those places. We just need to follow him. Amen.

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