



Epiphany 3

January 21st

THE NEW SHOFAR

The ways of God are not our ways - thank God!!

Jonah 3:1-10 - Mark 1:14-20

Jonah – a very human man of faith

The Book of Jonah, when understood as a work of prophetic literature, is one of the more challenging books of the Hebrew Bible. It offers an insight into the relationship between God and the people chosen to be his own. At the centre of the prophesy sits God and the narrative illustrates the way people can relate to a God who is very much intimately engaged with what is happening in human history. The narrative presents Jonah as more of a caricature of a prophet than a servant of God in the model of the great prophets of the Bible, men such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel. But he also stands in stark contrast with the weak, venal, arrogant and self-serving priests and prophets who had failed the nation as it was led into exile in Babylon (587^{B.C.}). Jonah knows he is weak, a sinner, someone totally unworthy of being chosen for the task given to him. This is highlighted by the way Jonah himself is not the key character in this short book. It is a narrative about an ever patient, merciful and loving God being presented to a people who had lost their land, their Temple and were now living in a foreign land.

It is not easy trying to understand the ways of God

Jonah is painted as being “a person like us” as he struggles to understand the God he has been called to serve. His difficulty comes about through his attempts to come to terms with the idea of divine justice and God’s merciful ways. The prophet is certain he knows how the people of Nineveh should be treated, and his very human judgment is harsh. He sees people through human eyes, in the light of

In what ways does Jonah offer us an insight into the God preached by Jesus (e.g. with Zacchaeus)? Who are the Nineveh’s in our world today? In what ways does our way of looking at them and acting towards them differ from God’s (think refugees)? What does the story of Jonah tell us about the way we need treat such situations and people?

very human judgments, evaluations and prejudices. Now he is forced to come to terms with a divine mercy that is free and unlimited. He could accept that God shows mercy to the Hebrew people, to the people of the Covenant but he is stunned and angry when this divine mercy is shown to these terrible undeserving criminal pagans from Nineveh. Remember, Nineveh represents the brutality, cruelty and evil that was the Babylonian empire which had brought so much suffering to God’s people. Here is the question challenging Jonah: *Why would God show such loving kindness to these evil pagans?*

Why would God bother with today’s believers?

As the Gospel journey begins, we are told that this Jesus is “special” to God. He too is a holy man, a prophet like the prophets of old but at the same time his holiness is greater and he is much more than a prophet. **Verse 15** itself is of great importance because it offers to us an insight to the beliefs of the early Church communities: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*

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We see here a Jesus who is shown as the one bringing Good News into the world. He does not sit in Jerusalem and draw crowds to his school of theology. His ministry is one of missionary activity, going out to the people and engaging them. Where the people gathered, so there was the Son of Man engaging with them. It was where they lived and work that he preached the message sent to them by God their Father. In this way he is offering a model of discipleship for all who follow after him. We are called to be taking the Good News out to people in the world, to all people.

The daily step for discipleship is repentance!

What Mark tells us about the Kingdom of God is that it is not dependent on the actions of men and women. It is something that God does, that God is in fact doing right at this very moment. Our task is to so open our lives that God may enter in and become our source of our peace, hope, joy and contentment. Thus the message of Jesus is a call to **repent**.

That word means *to turn around* and it calls for a new assessment of our priorities, goals, ambitions and the way we make our plans and decisions. To live under the rule of God (i.e. in the Kingdom of God) means to have God as the starting point as well as the end-point of all that we do. We need to *intentionally engage with God*. To repent means nothing less than having a wholehearted commitment to living Christ-like lives. We will sometimes fail in achieving this (maybe often fail) but it is the life-long pursuit of this wholehearted commitment that is called for by Jesus as he begins his ministry.

How would you explain the meaning of “repent”? What might it look like in our own lives and in the life of our parish? How do we “do it”? How might I (we – my parish) build this ongoing repentance into my spiritual resolutions and pastoral works for 2018?

One of the hardest parts of our journey as disciples is to appreciate our need to “repent”, that we are being called upon by God, in Jesus his Son, to continue to be transformed by his love and his mercy. We can never reach the point in our faith pilgrimage where we can say that we “have arrived” and can now sit back and relax. This is a great temptation, particularly the older we grow and the more content we become with the place our faith and our religion fits into what we are doing. Jesus has revealed to us the way God is ever new in our lives and can never be taken for granted. God responds to an ever-changing world and in order to grow in faith, we too need to grow alongside God (note the situation with Jonah). As soon as we think we know God our Heavenly Father has moved on and is showing himself in new ways, in new places and calls forth from us new responses. Thus, we need to understand how repenting is not a once in a lifetime act, as if we can suddenly be converted and become Christians. It is more a process of discovering the workings of God in everything that we do, think and say – each and every day of our lives.

God loves us as we are, where we are but still wants us to grow, to be renewed

God wants to be a part of *all we are* as well as *all we do*. The truly great thing about that message is how it means God cares about us. It is a message telling us how it is God’s desire to be with us. God is especially with us in our worst and most godless times, when we fail as disciples but when we find *God-with-us* (Emmanuel) in those moments, we need to understand God is not going to allow us to remain there. God calls us to grow, to move forward, to deepen the intimacy of our relationship with him. But in the end, it all comes down to us – to me. ***How willing am I to let God in and to risk the transformations that come with being a disciple of Christ?***

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