



Life is wasted if we do not grasp the glory of the cross, cherish it for the treasure that it is, and cleave to it as the highest price of every pleasure and the deepest comfort in every pain. What was once foolishness to us—a crucified God—must become our wisdom and our power and our only boast in this world.”

January 21st

Third Ordinary Sunday

Mark 1:14-20

## Israel's God is a God of infinite mercy

Today is the day to tell the story of Jonah, his only appearance in the regular lectionary cycle and it is a significant inclusion because of what it tells us of the ways of God. He is told: *go to Nineveh, the great city*. But that is no simple command. To an Israelite like Jonah, this would be equivalent to announcing today: *Go to an ISIS compound*. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and held the southern kingdom of Judah in slavery for almost one hundred years. Assyria was more than an enemy; it was a brutal occupying force that forever changed Israel's fortunes. Jonah is called out by God to go and to prophesy to the Nineveh and proclaim the judgment of God on all their people.

Importantly, Jonah is read in the Jewish calendar on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the feast in which Jews confess their sins against God and neighbour. This is the fundamental message for today. It is about the very nature of God's dealings with creation. What we see here is a challenge for us today. Do we depend on God's gracious mercy for our salvation? And live accordingly?

## Jonah rightly hates the Ninevites God loves

But Jonah runs away. Once again. Because his first escape failed God called him again: *go to Nineveh*. He goes but with not an iota of enthusiasm and ends up giving the wimpiest prophecy on record. It's a sermon of 5 words in Hebrew — *Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!* That's it!

But who would not keep it short. These people are mortal enemies, and the chance of instant and painful death is great. But that crazy sermon actually works. The enemy is transformed from being a fierce occupier to becoming a repentant nation – even the animals are caught up in the excitement. With just a couple of words, he turns a whole nation to God.

*Grace is more than God opening the door to salvation; it's God bringing people in.*

The crux of Jonah's story is in the fourth chapter, for the point of the narrative is not about the conversion of an entire enemy population. It is about Jonah's reaction to that amazing conversion. He is not amused because God is being consistent to His very nature, to the way he has always been. A rough translation of the Hebrew would read *Jonah considered this to be a wicked thing, a great evil and his anger against God burned a within him*. Jonah is furious because of the way God continues to act according to what he has promised in the past. He is faithful no matter what. The prophet is enraged because he knows *God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing*.

## How dare offer salvation to them!!

Jonah directs his anger at God because the Almighty has dared to offer to these evil, wicked, godless Ninevites the very same gift of salvation He has been offering to Israel from the time they entered into a covenant relationship with them on Mt Sinai. Unacceptable to Jonah. How dare God act with mercy to those Jonah hates! To sinners.

He is missing the magnificent message from God: Salvation is a purely gracious gift God freely offers to saints and sinners alike, even to the Ninevites among us. We do not own that grace, nor is it ours to dole out as we wish, to those who meet our very human moral benchmarks. God reveals that He is a forgiving God that the forgiving of sins flows from the very heart of God.

The story of Jonah challenges all of us to face the ways we try to lay claim to God and God's gift of grace. Here is the spiritual bottom line: If I cannot believe that God would save the

foulest of humans, the person who has offended me to the greatest degree, then I do not really believe in God's power to save my own soul. This is because I too am a sinner.

We need to begin by looking at those we consider to be sinners, "enemies" and affirm how God loves them too. The same God who gave Jonah a second chance gives the people of Nineveh a second chance. This means we cannot then begrudge that kind of mercy to others. This is a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, a God we know most fully in Jesus Christ.

### **Jonah and our Gospel**

The contrast between Jonah and the apostles Peter, Andrew, James and John could not be starker. He does not leave what he is doing and immediately follow God's call. He jumps on the first boat going in the *opposite* direction and hides in the hold of the ship, hoping that somehow God will not take notice. He does.

In the Gospels, John's ministry marks the end of one stage of history (the Old Testament time of Israel) and moves Jesus to centre stage. He initiates a new era in which He stands at the centre of all history and all things. All events and people are henceforth to be understood through the lens of the Gospel. His coming was in the "fullness of time," making Him *the* messenger promised in the Old Testament. As He was fulfilling the calling given to Him by the Father; He called to Himself a group of disciples with whom to share that ministry. True, they were a hotchpotch mob. Many times they misunderstood Him and just as often they hesitated in following Him. Judas betrayed Him and Peter denied Him. These would be the persons who would continue Jesus' work on earth after He left — ordinary people. People called. Them. You. Me. Us.

### **Jesus is the God's Good News**

Mark portrays Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom as a gift ("good news"), but also as a demand ("repent"). The one who promises the kingdom to sinners is the same one who calls

sinners to repentance and who calls disciples to give up all that they have to follow Him.

Since in Jesus everything is given *to me*, in Jesus everything is demanded *of me*. The four disciples' willingness to throw in their lot completely with Jesus illustrates that attitude and their attitude is a model we are to follow.

### **The Kingdom of God**

This *kingdom of God* describes the way we live in and order the world, a way which is in harmony with God's will. Insofar as a person is able to live their life according to God's will, they can be said to be living the kingdom of God. Christians look to the example of Jesus' life and ministry to develop their understanding of how to live. He models the Way for us to follow. As Christians do this, they recognise the importance of values such as justice, peace, love, mercy and compassion which are profoundly associated with the kingdom of God. Not only do Christians seek to live their own lives in harmony with God's will, they also strive to transform the world around them to more perfectly reflect the example of Jesus. Thus, Christian living the kingdom of God take up a distinctive approach to living their own life as well as a commitment to work towards transformation of the world to overcome injustice, division and oppression.

The terms 'repent' and 'believe' (vs 15) are used in the Greek present tense meaning a continued or repeated action. It conveys the idea of a major reorientation of life and has a sense of a definitive action beyond mere assent. Repent and believe is a call to an active and ongoing conversion of life beyond a passive intellectual assent. There can be no days off, no "I'm tired", "too busy" "Something else has come up". Discipleship is a fulltime calling. It is a disciplined spiritual life.

The call to live according to Gods' will and to build the kingdom of God remains at the absolute core of the Christian vocation. This call urges Christians to look beyond the confines of their places of worship and personal devotion to embrace the call to discipleship and to accept the essential missionary character of following Jesus. It is the only way to authentic discipleship.