

*The Miracle of Ninevah*

I really do not believe that we are meant to read the book of Jonah with too much of a straight face, and anyone who says that there's no humour in the Bible simply hasn't 'got' this book. If, for instance, we can read what is presented to us in our reading this morning without a smile – people running round a city covering animals with sackcloth as a sign of repentance – then I'm afraid we're missing the point. It's a book that is full of exaggeration and absurdity and while it was written to make some serious points, it was also written to make us laugh.

We've already gone over the story so far - how Jonah, son of Amittai, is called by God to go and preach against the big, sprawling city of Ninevah which was the capital of the then dominant empire of Assyria, and therefore capital of Israel's bitter enemy. And not only was Ninevah an enemy stronghold, it was also a fearsome place. It was large, not actually as large as it is portrayed here, requiring a three day trek to cross it – that's an example of exaggeration – but large nevertheless. And furthermore it was a city with a reputation that would have made Amsterdam seem positively puritanical. It is called elsewhere 'the city of blood' and a city of 'endless cruelty'. Would you want to go and preach to a place like that? Would you want to go and preach to an enemy city with a reputation like that? It was an impossible and highly dangerous task! Do you blame Noah for heading straight in the opposite direction? But having said that you do have to wonder why God chose Jonah in the first place. He does seem to have been particularly unpromising material. If we had read on in the story to the next chapter we would have found out what a colossal moaner and whinger he is, hard-hearted and self-pitying and totally lacking in the finer virtues of grace and compassion.

So, the situation so far does not look too hopeful. We have a very wicked and godless city, and we have a preacher who is utterly inadequate and not up to the task – and we are all set for a failure and a fiasco of Ninevah-sized proportions. Yet something extraordinary happens. Jonah, fresh – or probably not very fresh but very smelly - from the belly of the whale, finally does what he is told and goes to preach against Ninevah. But just note his sermon! Now, I am a great believer in brevity and many a sermon has been spoiled by exceeding its word limit and more can often be less – we know that

only too well. But Jonah really takes brevity to extremes! We have his entire sermon in one verse, verse 4 – listen to it again: ‘Forty days more and Ninevah will be overthrown!’ That’s it! Eight words, and in the original Hebrew in which this book was written it’s actually only five. And there’s no mention of God, no ‘Thus says the Lord...’ which is the usual way that a prophet’s message begins. Just five words pitted against the capital of the empire; five inadequate words shouted against the huge city of blood and of endless cruelty. What a farce! Yet the effect is devastating. The message is heard and taken to heart. And note that the message takes root firstly not at the power centre of empire, not with the king, but out there on the margins and we read in verse 6, ‘when the news reached the king of Ninevah’ - when eventually it spread to him: and maybe he was the last to hear because with God the first always comes last and the last are ushered to the front of the queue. And the city repents – much to Jonah’s disgust, and God spares the city, changing his mind about the calamity that was about to be brought upon it.

This is what we might call the miracle of Ninevah – a hopeless prophet facing the pointless task of preaching to a godless a city. And a miracle happens – because of course the crucial character in this story is certainly not Jonah and definitely not anyone in Ninevah, least of all the king of Ninevah. The crucial character is God. And that is why the story exaggerates and caricatures, because this is its way of profiling and throwing into relief the God who makes the impossible happen. This is why God chooses to send Jonah to Ninevah, the very capital of the empire, because even Ninevah in all its imperial pride and arrogance, stained as it is with blood and endless cruelty, can be transformed by this God. And that is why God chooses Jonah, the most reluctant and inadequate of prophets, because God delights in using the most unlikely people for the divine purposes. And that is why Jonah is given a message of only five words because under the breath of God’s Spirit five ungracious words, shouted reluctantly from a resentful heart, can make Churchill’s greatest rhetoric seem like feeble ramblings.

Well, what a great passage for this morning, when in a short while we will ordain new elders to service in this church, as well as transferring some deacons to the role of elder. The church today faces an impossible task and there are many echoes of this passage in our situation today. Ninevah was not an Israelite city where there was some knowledge and understanding of God. It was not an Israelite city familiar to some degree with the name and the ways of

God. It was a foreign city, alien to the God of Israel. And increasingly we find ourselves today in this part of the world living in Ninevah, a world increasingly cut adrift from Christian tradition and belief and influence. In this part of the world we often refer now to a post-Christian society, or to post-Christendom – Christendom referring to that era when the church had official standing in society and where the Bible was seen as in some sense foundational to society, the rock on which our common life was founded and from which our values and principles were mined. And it's all changing. It's all going. And we feel sometimes like Jonah encountering Ninevah – where do we begin? And to God we must often appear like Jonah: resistant, disobedient, scared, faithless, stubborn. And the task is too great! Except that it's not all about us, any more than it was all about Jonah. It's about God.

Let me just explain to you a subtle shift in the way that many theologians think now about the mission of the church. In fact we talk much less about the mission of the church now and much more about the mission of God, of which the church is but a part. As it's often put, 'It's not that the church of God has a mission, but rather the mission of God has a church'. Do you see the difference? 'It's not that the church of God has a mission, but rather the mission of God has a church'. And when you see it that way our perspective changes and it is God and not us that is the agent of mission – thank God! And God, in God's inscrutable wisdom and grace and generosity, uses even us.

This, then, is the context in which we ordain new elders this morning and we welcome former deacons into the office of eldership. What have we to offer, we Jonahs faced with Ninevah? What hope for the future of the church, and for Christianity? Well, listen. If God can use Jonah of all people to bring Ninevah of all cities to its knees in repentance, then believe me – all bets are off! Amen, and to God be the praise and the glory.