

1 September 2019

Jonah chapter 4

Setting Sail

Good morning. Today's sermon will be little different because I want to feed back to you from yesterday's very encouraging *Setting Sail* event, when 24 of us gathered to worship, pray, listen and discuss the future priorities and direction for St Brandon's. And we enjoyed coffee and croissants too...

Our opening worship included reflection on Brandon's story with the help of two images of the saint.

We noted his awareness of **God the Father and Creator**, his joy in the majesty and beauty of creation. We thought about the risk he took and the fear he overcame in setting out into the unknown. We noted that he held the cross of **Christ** ahead of him to guide him all the way and that, in the Celtic icon we considered, the masts of the ship made a cross in the very centre of the image. Finally, the **Holy Spirit** filled the sails of his oracle, empowering and guiding him across the ocean.

We then moved on to think about our journey so far, here in Brancepeth.

We recognised how the church's story for this generation has been shaped by the remarkable process of rebuilding and restoration after the fire almost 21 years ago- we even watched part of the video of that fateful night. Last week I watched the whole of this, with sound, and I found it an intensely moving and shocking experience.

Whilst the horror and trauma of the fire remain fresh, especially for those who were here at that time, we also saw the lectern, the word of God, still standing amidst the devastation of the interior. And the image of the church glowing

from within, full of flames which sent sparks out to the world around, struck some of us as a promise of what the Holy Spirit can do in our lives. As we pray each day in Morning Prayer:

'set our hearts on fire with love for you, now and for ever.'

Next we took some time to muse over what is good, what is not so good and what we dream of for our church.

You will have seen some of our musings around the church this morning. *Explain and point them out. Bunting- celebration; scroll to record what makes us sad or needs attention; light bulb sheet for bright ideas.*

We will also have these out next Sunday for those who are away this weekend, and for our Messy Church members to add in comments. We want as many members of our wider church family as possible to take part. Please do read, and add to them. All the comments will be carefully considered as we use them to discern what God is saying to us. Back to yesterday:

After coffee (the second lot!) we read the whole of the book of Jonah, together. We realised how dramatic it is, and scary, and funny and how very *human*. We reflected on it in words and images and we studied the final chapter especially. Here's a flavour of this fruitful study...

Jonah has tried to hide from God by sailing to Tarshish in southern Spain, rather than going to Nineveh in Syria- several thousand miles in the wrong direction. So God sent a storm, Jonah confessed he was the cause and he was thrown overboard and rescued by a passing whale, that swallowed him. In the whale's

belly, Jonah prayed, repented of his disobedience and after 3 days, was thrown back onto the shore, a few miles closer to Nineveh, which is where he went.

Nineveh was a large city of 120 000 people, a wonder of the Assyrian empire with temples to Pagan gods, the last place Jonah would want to go.

But Jonah heads in and starts telling them they are doomed for their wickedness and time is short- 40 days before the city will be destroyed. (pause) They *listen* to Jonah and *hear* what God is saying to them, they repent and turn to the living God to save them. Jonah's job is done. So he and they live happily ever after? Not quite.

Then comes chapter 4. This is how one participant yesterday summarised it:

Jonah is in a strop. He is even angry that God is slow to anger.

Jonah is furious that God forgives the people of Nineveh!

It's a petty, inward looking anger that stops him rejoicing in the incredible love and mercy of God. And, as another person said,

Jonah is angry about something he can't change – which is common enough today!

Another comment fed back yesterday, from the very start of the story:

Jonah flees because he does not want Nineveh given warning of judgment and a chance for repentance.

Which is both ironic and rather difficult when you are a prophet! Preachers and teachers be warned.

We pondered and discussed *why* Jonah behaved as he did. Here's one person's take on it:

He is a man who loves the temple in Jerusalem; that is where he worships, that is where he belongs.

And he knows the world as 'us' versus 'them': Israel versus Assyria, Jerusalem versus Nineveh. Jerusalem is where God belongs; Jerusalem is where people have to do with God. Nineveh is elsewhere. Nineveh is godless; it is where the godless people live.

But God refuses Jonah's division of the world. God ignores Jonah's insistence upon where God belongs. Nineveh is God's, no less than Jerusalem: God made the people of Nineveh no less than the people of Israel.

Thankfully, and I quote another contribution:

*God is **abounding in steadfast love** and does not abandon us, whatever we do. He doesn't abandon the Ninevites, or Jonah – however far he runs.*

The theme of God's grace and mercy struck us powerfully, and also Jonah's rejection of it, and ours too: *Grace is a reality beyond the division between the deserving and undeserving. Yet we tend to think in those terms.*

Then comes the strange parable of the plant which God gives to Jonah for shade, and which is then eaten by the worm, Here's another response which made us all think:

*Sin is the worm afflicting the bush of Nineveh; it is killing them.
God is losing this city like Jonah is losing the shade.
Jonah is angry at losing shade; God is losing 120,000 lives.
Is God not right to care for them?*

The ending of the book of Jonah is... unsatisfactory.

As someone summed it up yesterday:

The book doesn't end with Jonah turning back to God. We don't know what choice Jonah makes. He runs away and runs away – and God runs after him. Will Jonah turn back? He has a choice to make...

And so do we.

There is much more I could say. Do pick up a sheet with ch4 on it, or read the whole of the book of Jonah in your Bible at home.

At the end of yesterday morning we shared Communion together under the cross. It was a special and encouraging time.

So what now? I think there are important things for us to learn from Jonah as we move forward.

1. **God's grace:** our choice to accept it and rejoice or reject it and be angry- even in a polite suppressed British kind of way, which is a bit outraged by the extravagance of God's mercy.
2. **Our attitude to those who don't come to church,** the 'outsiders' Let us ask God to teach us how to pray and have a right attitude, to love people as he loves them. We will need to heed the warnings as we think about our mission and outreach.

What next?

There will be careful consideration of all the comments made. The SMDT will do this and will also be looking ahead to who might be on the next team. (Explain: shared ministry development team- working on new developments- serves for 3 years- new team will be gathered later in the autumn to continue this process and consider outcomes from the diocesan Waymark conference next month.)

As our plans develop, we will all have the chance to

GET ON BOARD (a phrase which has come to me and 'stuck')

Some parts of the journey may be like boarding the train at Durham to head for Edinburgh... enjoying the wonderful views of the Northumberland coast and Holy Island, travelling along the tracks. Rather like our Sunday service, elements of this journey are always the same, but each is unique too. I like to sit by the window and look for Holy Island , and the Farne Isles, on a clear day... We arrive in Edinburgh under the solid mass of the Castle rock and emerge into Waverley Station. We remember though that the rock itself was the result of a volcanic eruption, and the tracks laid so close to the sea further south were a daring and visionary feat of Victorian engineering...

But I suspect other parts of the journey will be more like Brandon's boarding a ship, heading into the unknown- with no rails to guide him, but instead putting up a sail and seeking the power and direction of the Holy Spirit.

We can be sure, as Brandon was, and as Jonah discovered, that God is faithful, that his mercy and grace are without end, and that so long as our hearts are turned to him, and we travel humbly following his guidance, he will take us to new and places where we see afresh the wonders of his love.

Please pray as we continue the journey together.

Use Collect for Trinity 10.

Amen.