

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 7th November 2021.  
Jonah 3:1-5,10, Psalm 62.5-end, Mark 1:14-20*

***Repent***

*Alison Hobbs*

The extraordinary thing about the lectionary is that readings are on a set three-year cycle, they are not selected in response to events around us, they simply collide with them and speak into whatever they co-exist with.

It is the nature of what we call the 'living Word of God' that the Word exists to speak into the now, and we hear it afresh every time as it reconfigures its age-old message to come alive for us over and over again, each time we encounter it, as different people facing different circumstances.

So part of me was not surprised that in the midst of COP26, the readings are a call to repent and follow Christ.

Indeed, I would have found it hard to not preach on these issues whatever the readings as I find my attention very much drawn to these matters, even though I admit I am not spending much time following them in the press.

I'm sure I am as much a blend of ignorance, prejudice and self-righteousness as the next person so my main worry in approaching this sermon is how to side-step colouring it with my opinions: preaching *at* you!

So, I shall try and stay very much with the Word, and what the Word might be saying to us in the context of today.

Jonah is given what must be one of the briefest oracles any prophet gets:

*"Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown!"*

There is a time-limit on your current state of being;  
there is a clock ticking and you'd best heed it;  
you are on a short fuse;  
disaster is imminent.

The surprising thing is that they listen and believe. Unlike the prophets of other biblical stories who have a really hard time and only get believed retrospectively, the people of Ninevah are not what we would call sceptics, and deniers, and conspiracy theorists; nor are they complacents, or cant-be-bothereds; nor are they paralysed by fear at the scale of it: they believe God as heard through the mouth of Jonah, and they repent.

The exact word repent is not used but it is what they are doing when they proclaim a fast and put on sackcloth: repentance is a change of mind or behaviour.

The people of Ninevah saw and heard the truth from God through Jonah, and turned away from all their transgressions. *‘When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.’*

The Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) contains several instances of God changing his mind about bringing destruction, but also of a God who will bring a new heart into his people, who will make his people faithful and united with him in purpose: this is the prelude to Jesus, his heralding in of the kingdom, and the paschal mystery: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Five or six hundred years later than the story of Jonah, John the Baptist was calling the people around Judea to repent - change their lifestyle in preparation for what is to come. We pick up the story in Mark at the point where John has been arrested (he has become a threat to the powers that rule) but another, greater than he, has stepped into the picture: Jesus of Nazareth, and he, too, is calling people to repent. *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.”*

The people around Jesus at that time would have understood ‘the fulfilment’ as the hope for the intervention of God in the affairs of the world; God establishing himself as king, and acknowledged by all.

People did not pick up on the divine nature of Jesus until after Easter, so at this point he is speaking of the closeness of the fulfilment and the kingdom, as near in time, as well as near in the person of himself, although this was not yet disclosed.

To prepare for this coming kingdom and fulfilment, they needed to repent: to turn back to God with new minds and hearts, open to hearing the good news.

Now what parallels jump out at you in today’s world?

With the world’s focus on COP 26, the gathering of world leaders (well, the willing ones, anyway) to discuss climate change, we are surely hoping and praying for a change of heart and actions from top down.

For those parties who signed up in Paris to renew and strengthen their commitment, as national leaders, to participate in changes that will reduce

carbon output, and in taking steps to broaden bio-diversity: to lessen the impact of humans on our planet and try and avoid worsening the damage already done.

We are placing our hopes in politicians who are enmeshed in a web of powers: powers of commerce, powers of voters, powers of personal fallibility. As never before, we need the intervention of God in the affairs of the world, we need to hold fast to the promise of the kingdom, praying, as we do for Thy kingdom come.

To build his kingdom on earth, Jesus starts to draw people into his inner circle of teaching and revelation, and the way Mark describes the calling of the first four disciples is a picture of the compelling authority that attracts immediate response – portrayed as unquestioning obedience. Their human weaknesses show up as time goes on, but the obedience to what they see in Jesus carries them through and redeems them.

It seems to me that we are called to attend to what it means for us to follow Christ and build towards his kingdom, more urgently than ever. To explore for ourselves what it means for each of us, to be a disciple of Christ.

There are many words, many stories with which Jesus taught and illustrated what it means to be a disciple but they are all expansions of that great commandment to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Given we are living beyond our means, consuming and polluting at an unsustainable rate, we simply cannot interpret ‘loving our neighbours as ourselves’ as trying to provide them with the same inflated rate of consuming. We cannot console ourselves with the notion that we are being charitable and virtuous by raising the bar that we call poverty: aspiring to bring everyone into the same comfortable standard of living as we inhabit.

There is not enough to go round, even if we were able to wave some magic wand and make it happen, it would be a short-term crash for humanity globally.

Every prudent manager knows they must work within what is available and make do, cut the cloth accordingly.

God is an amazing provider when we work hand-in-hand with creation: there is enough to go round but to make it stretch,

we need to adjust our expectations of what our share of the cookie looks like.

We need to re-write what we have come to see as our rights and entitlements

and look again to Jesus to learn what we really need, as distinct from what we want.

“Give us today our daily bread – and very occasionally, a croissant, please”

It is a political no-no to upset people’s assumptions that the standard of living is only ever moving upwards. I heard a politician in an interview yesterday being asked if they would be prepared to challenge every individual to give things up, use less. The politician had indicated that they acknowledged this was the way forward, yet said emphatically, “I’d not be comfortable doing that.”

Now we jumped four verses in the reading from Jonah, and those verses told how the King of Ninevah, on hearing the news Jonah brought, also removed his robes, sat in sackcloth and ashes and decreed that all of Ninevah – including the animals – would fast and change their ways, because, said the King, *‘Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.’*

- the people and their leader, united in acting for change, of one mind in their actions, and in their hope they place in God.

What a contrast to the vast majority of our political leaders today.

As a final illustration of what I think it means to be a disciple of Christ, let me leave you to ponder on a quote from Dorothy Day.

*“The mystery of the poor is this: that they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for Him.*

*It is the only way we have of knowing and believing in our love.*

*The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge of and belief in love.”*

I repeat,

*“The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge of and belief in love.”*

Can we stop pretending that all we need to do to love our neighbour – the poor, globally – is to level up?

Can we be humble enough and loving enough to risk sharing in that poverty – to level down?

*‘Though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it’ ...*

and come, Follow Me.

*Amen*