

‘go to Nineveh’
a sermon preached on the
third sunday after epiphany
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st john’s
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 62; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 21-28.

There is a much-told story in the Church of England of the day that the Bishop of London went to meet a great actor and asked him how it was that he could fill his theatre eight times a week while he, the Bishop, could only pull together a small crowd once a week. The actor replied, ‘Bishop, it’s because you take truth and make it sound like fiction, while I take fiction and make it sound like truth.’

This is where we are with the book of Jonah. Despite the attempts of those who try to prove that human beings can live perfectly happily in the digestive system of any number of large fish, it is clear that we are dealing with here a work of fiction. But like other great stories it is full of truths that we seriously need to listen to. This book of Jonah is a supremely important book not only of scripture but also of all ancient literature.

The story is simplicity itself. Jonah hears a request from God to warn the inhabitants of Nineveh to repent if they do not wish to face destruction. These are the very people who caused Israel’s exile in the first place. Rather than deliver the message Jonah takes a ship as far in the other direction as he can get. But God sends a storm. Jonah is thrown overboard and ends up in the belly of a great fish, which takes him off and spews him up at the very place God had originally sent him to.

A second time God speaks to Jonah, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ And the city repented, much to the horror of Jonah. It seems that Jonah had a too limited a view of God. For Jonah God’s love ought to be limited to Israel, he has to learn that God’s love is unlimited—that God’s love is there for all.

In this story we are looking in on a great debate. Having returned from exile Israel faced the question of what kind of nation they were to be. It is a question also for us as we observe our national day in this coming week. For many in Jonah’s Israel the obvious reaction to a hostile and threatening world was a policy of narrow exclusiveness. Racial and religious purity must be preserved. Mixed marriages were outlawed. Ezra even demanded Jews who had non-Jewish wives and children must send them away. ‘The holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the land.’ Ezra 9.2. There was a lust for vengeance. ‘On that day I will make the clans of Judah like a blazing pot on a pile of wood... and they shall devour to the right and to the left all the surrounding peoples’ Zech. 12.6. The same mood is found in the terrible passages in the book of Esther with its picture of a slaughter when ‘The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering them and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them’ Esther 9.5. The first reaction was a fierce nationalism.

But there was another response. The book of Ruth took as its heroine a Moabite woman, a foreigner, and an alien in the land—and showed how life and human relationships are more important than racial barriers. And it is in this context the author of Jonah tells his story. Israel has a universal mission, to preach God’s message to the world, and the folly and the wickedness of Israel’s reluctance to share the divine spirit and purpose. ‘Go to Nineveh,

that great city.’ What Israel has to understand is that God’s compassion is not just a compassion for Israel but for all; she must be a light to Gentiles. God does not go in for narrow nationalisms. God is concerned about everyone. Nationalistic bigots will quickly find that they are on the other side from God.

If this is an ancient story it is also a modern one. The limiting of love to our kind and the anathematising of others is still one response to racial and religious difference. Examples are everywhere. Think of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. After a bomb attack in Israel a mob of Jewish settlers set about driving Palestinians from their homes. One Jewish woman, her face full of hate says ‘there are 20 Arab countries let them go and live in on of them—this is all ours.’ In the same mood the mother of a Palestinian suicide bomber has spoke of her pride at her son’s attack on an ice cream parlour in Tel Aviv.

We see similar positions adopted in other parts of the world and we even see signs of it in our own nation at times of national stress and anxiety. Emerging hatreds of one ethnic group for another develop, the demonising of those who are different increases, intolerance grows towards those who express their faith and belief in ways that are different to our own.

There can be a terrible narrow darkness within the human spirit. But there is a liberating word from God. For Jonah the word of the Lord is ‘Go to Nineveh, that great city.’ The love of God is not limited to one community or to one race. In this moment of insight Jonah looks ahead to the gospel which says ‘There is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free, for you are all one in Jesus Christ.’ God made us one, Christ died to keep us one, and we have to live as one.

As Jonah eventually came to see that marvellous things do happen when we make the trip to Nineveh. Let me tell you a true story—it is not an Australian story but it is a powerful human story containing a universal principal, which expresses the message of the gospel. In July 1865, having surrendered his army North of Virginia only a couple of months before, Robert E Lee was in Richmond, the older confederate capital. The air was still electric with tension. Richmond was still occupied by federal troops. It had recently been subject to a cruel siege, defeat, looting and burning. Its citizens were bitter with humiliation and apprehensive about the large number of blacks who had been freed by the war.

At the communion Service on Sunday at St Paul’s, the minister invited the congregation to come forward to receive Holy Communion. The first to move to the rail was a well-dressed black man. This was a great shock to all the whites present—to them it was nothing more than arrogance, another attempt to force change on them. For a few moments no one moved. Then another man came forward and knelt next to the black man—the other man was Robert E Lee. The effect, on the rest of the congregation was life changing.

Whatever the barriers of exclusivity we are held by, whatever the antagonisms we nurse, the word of God is always; ‘Go to Nineveh, that great city’. That is how we break into the new world to which God is inviting us.