

Sermon Preached at the Eucharist Epiphany III, 22 January 2012

Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle by

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As we approach *Back to Church Sunday* it may be that among this morning's scripture it is Verse 17 of the morning's gospel that seems most resonant. That call of Jesus to his disciples to 'fish for people' seems to capture one of the intentions of *Back to Church Sunday* – gathering into the saving net of the church those who are currently, for whatever reason, beyond it.

The image in that passage carries a suggestion of Jeremiah 16.16: ('I am now sending for many fishermen [to the Israelites], says the Lord, and they shall catch them'.) The fishermen in Jeremiah are the nations who will set Israel free from bondage and exile, returning them to the land that God intended for them. The fishermen in the gospel are those individuals who gathered together in the collective of the church seek out and gather in those who are exiled from God.

In the gospels Jesus calls people and, almost always, they come. They get caught in the net of his voice and cannot resist. They leave boats, possessions, and relatives and go where he is going. In time he sends them out to do the same, to teach and preach and heal and bring others with them.

It may be that there is another text from this morning's readings that is relevant to *Back to Church Sunday* and that is our reading from Jonah. Jonah is not a fisherman, rather he is one who is gathered by a fish; one who has sojourned in a fish and then been vomited up onto the dry land. So what does the experience of Jonah say to us on the verge of *Back to Church Sunday*?

First of all, we are told that the word of the Lord came to Jonah, just as the word of the Lord has come to each of us to summon and dispatch us to carry the good news to others. Second, Jonah is given a task he would rather not have to do. He is sent to Nineveh to proclaim repentance.

Nineveh is the capital of Israel's powerful enemy, Assyria. It is as though you or I was asked to go to Tehran and proclaim the gospel.

Although Jonah's challenge is a substantial one it is a reflection of the challenge given to us to proclaim the good news in a great big world that seems at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile. Like Jonah we can be easily tempted to walk the other way.

Our reading this morning begins with the word of the Lord coming to Jonah; but remember this is the second time he has heard that word. This is the second time 'the word of the Lord came to Jonah' and called him to arise and go 'to Nineveh, that great city'.

What is different for Jonah (and what makes all the difference in the end for the people of Nineveh, who do indeed repent and are spared destruction) is those three days in the whale. It is his encounter with the whale and the time for reflection that he has had that makes Jonah more disposed to heed God's call and 'get up and go to Nineveh'.

What has our three days looked like? What is our whale; the place where we are sequestered or entombed waiting to be ready to hear God's word, waiting to be vomited up, to arise and go and preach? It may be a time of illness, darkness, confusion. It may be a time of superficial comfort and contentment.

I think we are gathered this morning in the most handsome whale on the East coast of Australia. However we cannot spend our time here hiding, instead this must be a time of receptivity toward the word of God.

Initially Jonah disobeyed God's call because he had no desire to be a vehicle of conversion and repentance for the people of Nineveh. Even when he responds the second time his motive, as he discovers, is not quite the same as God's motive. What Jonah encounters is the power of God's mercy and grace as that mercy and grace is extended not only to him but to the people of Nineveh.

Jonah discovers that God persists in seeing that our divinely-appointed tasks are carried out. John Calvin commented that

There is here set before us a remarkable proof of God's grace, — that he was pleased to bestow on Jonah his former dignity and honour. He was indeed unworthy of the common light, but God not only restored him to life, but favored him again with the office and honour of a prophet. This, as I have said, Jonah obtained through the wonderful and singular favour of God. As he had previously fled, and by disobedience deprived himself in a manner of all God's favour, the recovery of his prophetic office was certainly not obtained through his own merit

Jonah sets out after this second call. When he gets there he does not moderate the message of destruction – forty days and the city will be destroyed, because he believes the people of Nineveh richly deserve that destruction at the hands of a righteous God.

The scandal of the gospel, which is what Jonah confronts when his call to repentance is responded to so immediately, is that a merciful God is ready to forgive those who turn to him. The story of Jonah depicts the conflict of mercy and moralism. Moralism, human judgement, is one of the things most responsible for driving people away from the church. The spiritual gift that Jonah, like the Pharisees and like some churches possesses most strongly is the gift of righteous indignation. However God's justice and God's righteousness is made known in mercy. The story of Jonah challenges the righteously indignant to put aside moral superiority and to take on the character of God whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. His story is a reminder that the only way forward for any of us is to demonstrate the same mercy that has been offered to us.

There is much that is absurd in the book of Jonah: a man gets swallowed by a fish; animals don sackcloth, and a prophet gets so angry over the death of a bush that he eventually wishes he himself were dead. But the questions the story provokes are quite serious. It is God's ability to do the incomprehensible, to extend mercy to the least deserving that opens the door to our own hope.

Who is unforgiveable? No one. Not even us. It is God's mercy, not God's judgment that represents the most powerful threat to the plans and principles and expectations by which we contrive to keep the world in its

place, to keep some of us on the inside and others on the outside; to delude ourselves about who we are and who others are.