

St Stephen's Canonbury London N.1

All-age Morning Worship 21 August 2016

Bible Readings: Jonah 3; Matthew 9:35 - 38

Preaching: – Mission Completed

This morning we continue the series on the prophet Jonah. We come across the prophet earlier in the Bible in 2 Kings 14:25, in the reign of Jeroboam II, when in the eight century BC the people of Israel were turning away from God and making political alliances with other nations. His prophetic message then was successful. He prophesied to the King, "You are going to have a great success and your borders will grow. It was so indeed.

On this occasion he received a message from God to go to Nineveh the Assyrian capital city and warn them that God's judgment was coming on them. But Jonah was not very happy about this new commission. He determined to avoid it. So he headed towards Spain in the West instead of Assyria in the East.

Assyria was the northern part of the kingdom, now the present Iraq, known for cruelty. The people were vicious, and atrocious. They were greatly feared by their neighbours. In that respect Jonah had a reason to be afraid but not to run away from God. Secondly Jonah being a prophet was aware of God as being very compassionate and if Nineveh repented God would certainly relent in his fury and forgive them.

Jonah boarded a ship at Joppa running away. What a laughable plan, a prophet of God intending to run away from God. The Psalmist in 139 verses 8 and 9, says "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wing of the morning and dwell in the utmost part of the sea your hands shall lead meand your right hand shall hold me." Elijah before him also tried but failed see 1 Kings 19, though he was running away from the threat by Jezebel, Ahab's wife. But in verse 4 he told God he could no more serve him. That was his Jonah-moment. What follows after that was a three-fold mission – to anoint two kings (Hazeal to be king over Syria, Jehu to be king over Israel) and anoint Elisha to be his replacement.

The book of Jonah was about Mission. We see in the story that God is a God of mission a God of mercy and a God of Revelation. The whole story can be divided into four parts: In part 1, we see Jonah attempted desertion and the storm (Revelation of God as powerful over nature). In part 2 Jonah landed in the fish (a miracle) and prayed to God in the manner of the psalms. In part 3, he was re-commissioned, and completed the Mission though grudgingly. In part 4 we see his encounter with God expressing his annoyance about the action of God in forgiving the people of Nineveh. I leave his sulking to John next week.

However, Jonah was caught napping on the ship when everyone else was in panic. He was cornered and was eventually thrown into the sea to pacify the storm. Before he could reach the bottom the whale swallowed him and remained there three days and three nights foreshadowing our Lord's death and resurrection in the New Testament, Matthew 12: 39 – 41. In that passage Jesus refused to do a miracle to prove that he was the Messiah but pointed to his death and resurrection as the sign they required.

On being spewed out by the whale God gave him a second chance to proceed on the mission assigned to him. God does not cut corners when he acts for his moves are for real. If God cuts corners the world will not be able to cope. His actions are always steady, thorough and miraculous. His methods are profound. God always persists with his people and those who will change.

It was a miracle to save Jonah. But was also a greater miracle to save Nineveh. Jonah preached that in 40 days Nineveh shall be overthrown (what one writer called a one line sermon). The people heard it and took action. They fasted and repented, even their king.

In all these, Jonah was revealed as a narrow-minded nationalist. The belief among the Jews was that only Israel is the people of God and no one else. That was a principle of exclusiveness of the highest order. God created all things and all people and cares for all nations and individuals, hence the Mission to Nineveh. The book of Jonah is a condemnation of exclusiveness It points us to the message of Christ to love others even our enemies. God forgave the people of Nineveh but Jonah would rather them not repent and be destroyed. We too sometimes feel bad and wish people who offend us evil. I think God would be justified to let Jonah rot under the sea or be killed by the whale, after all, the prophet had disobeyed him. That would be human thinking and approach. But God is full of mercy and abundant in love. He is long suffering and does not punish us according to our sins, (Nehemiah 9: 17). He shows mercies to the individuals as well as to nations, even to those who have no regard for Him, if they repent.

At St Stephen's we have a Mission spelt out in our Mission Action Plan, 2016 -2021 (all humans are time-bound). We are a Christian Community seeking to know Godand those around us. This is the over-arching statement which appears on our information sheet every Sunday. The values we aspire to include among others: Diversity and Inclusion, Theological and Liturgical Breadth, Practically demonstrated love. (show copy of MAP)

The others are contained in the MAP. Please get a copy and see what we are about at St Stephen's. The MAP is not just for the PCC members or those who play leadership role. They are what you and I have voluntarily promised to undertake in our service to God. Are we playing our part or are the Jonah moment factor drawing us away from God? Consider the first one listed above. It means we accept that we are different in regard to race, culture, social status, education and up-bringing. That is the microcosm of the society in which we live. As Christians we shall not allow bigotry and exclusiveness to prevent us responding to God's message and carry His mission forward.

Let me say again that the mission for every believer is to make the name of Jesus known in their thinking, by their words and their actions in order to demonstrate that God cares for all peoples. He is the only God worthy of our praise and worship. This in essence is the mission God gave to Jonah and to us as well. After all his running about and misadventure Jonah completed the mission successfully but with God's help.

In the Gospel reading, our Lord Jesus Christ set the example of what mission involves. First he himself went through the towns and villages teaching, preaching the Good News of the Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. As the body of Christ on earth this is our mission too. Jesus alerted his disciples to the vast number of people who were waiting to hear the message of the kingdom of God. He then sent them out in to the field to harvest for God. Before their departure he asked them to pray to God to send in more workers. I think I can say without doubt that you and I

are among the workers. Let us pray continually for God to aid us as his workers to be able to achieve the mission before us and to play whatever role he has assigned to us in the community here in Islington as well as in the nation. May God grant us the humility to accept his plan for us and keep us faithful, when in 'Jonah - moment' we try to avoid our calling or mission. Amen

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