

Third Sunday of the Epiphany - 21 January 2024

Message – Called to be prophetic

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, lighten our paths and guide us in your ways. **Amen.**

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, is not alone in the Bible in this reluctance, particularly when God expects such radical action. Even when Jonah does respond to God's call, it is without enthusiasm. In Hebrew, his message is just five words, *'Yet | forty | days | and-Ninevah | will-be-overthrown.'*

There are no beautifully crafted words, just a blunt message, which despite Jonah, gets through to the people of Ninevah, who respond with far more faith and hope than Jonah had even though they are unsure how God will respond.

This is the second time in Jonah's story where those on the outside responded with unexpected virtue. The sailors on the ship Jonah had taken from Joppa to Tarshish to escape from God, tried everything to avoid throwing Jonah overboard and, after the storm had died away, the sailors made sacrifices and vows to God.

Beyond, don't be like Jonah, this story a twofold message. Firstly, God cares for all people. Ninevah was the city to which Assyria had deported many people of the northern tribes of Israel. Those who remained in Judah had an understandable contempt for the city and Assyria.

Yet, the prophets tell us that God was working in and through the Assyrians and Jonah's story reminds us that all

people are a part of God's good creation; God has not abandoned anyone, and neither should we.

The second message of Jonah is that response to God is not limited to those who consider themselves God's people. People may respond to all sorts of messages from God in the way that they can understand those messages. We need to recognise and support those responses.

As church members, God loves us no more than anyone else. God loves everyone with perfect love. The message of story of Jonah to the people of Judah was, '*you are called to be a light to all peoples*' (Isaiah 42.6, 49.6).

Jonah reminds them and us of the qualities of God, '*I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.*' (Jonah 4.2) It is easy for us to, like Jonah, get angry with God. Jonah is angry first because God does not destroy Ninevah and then with God for allowing the bush that had sprouted overnight and given such wonderful shade for a day to be destroyed.

In both cases God asks Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' (Jonah 4.4, 9) How often might God ask us the same question? There are things that should rightly make us angry but there are many more situations where our response should be one of steadfast love.

As followers of the way of Christ, we are to be as Christ to the world. Christ is a light to the world (John 1.4, 8.12, 9.5) and we too are called to be a light to the world. Our lives should speak of light and love and all that gives life for everyone, for those we love and those we struggle to love.

Occasionally, I wonder what the author's of our common lectionary were thinking when they chose a particular reading. Last and this week's readings from the epistles are cases in point. Neither passage is easy to fully understand not least because Paul was responding to a letter from the Corinthians that we don't have. We must infer the questions Paul was answering, which puts us in a precarious position, requiring some significant assumptions.

Paul often speaks in categorical terms. He followed the rabbinic model of exaggeration to get the point across, which we also see in Christ's teaching. Paul speaks directly into particular contexts, such as to the letters from a church which he had founded. This categorical and context driven rhetorical style means we can find him saying things that contradict what he has said elsewhere. Our challenge becomes to work out his underlying principles.

From the two passages from one Corinthian, it is hard not to come away with the impression that Saint Paul had some hangups about sex. The claim '*Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body*' (1 Cor 6.18) is at best questionable. Yet, speaking, as he was, to people in a city renowned for sexual immorality, this was probably the greatest pressure on their lives and the greatest way in which the members of this young church could be prophetic in their community.

Today, we need to acknowledge there are other ways of sinning against our body. Some of the more obvious are drinking too much or eating too much, or too little, or extreme sports. More hidden is the worrying acceptability, in our society, of working too much, of not taking time for

rest, physical activity, and re-creation. In these failures, we damage our bodies and increase the probability of a wide variety of adverse health outcomes.

In their extreme forms many of these tendencies are recognised as mental illnesses. The attitude to which is slowly changing, hopefully for the better. Yet, there is still a great barrier to talking about such things.

You will notice I have transitioned from talking about physical health to mental health. We cannot separate body and mind; they are an integrated whole as much as we may not always feel that way when our body or mental drive let us down. They are both part of the whole that is our being.

With many matters of mental health, early intervention can make all the difference. A potentially damaging pattern of behaviour is not given time to do great harm because a healthier way is found of viewing life.

I believe that mental health is one of the areas where the church can be transformational, where God is calling us to have a prophetic voice. So, remembering Jonah, let's not follow his example! But rather hear God's call and follow it.

As a community we should be outward looking. Our care for one another is an attempt to reflect the steadfast love of God, though we don't always get it right. Some people frustrate us and their views differ from ours. Yet, when God's love drives us, we can get along remarkably well.

In getting along remarkably well, we should be creating a community that is able to welcome and support others. For better or worse, over time we get to know one another

quite well; this creates trust and understanding. It gives us the confidence to share more of ourselves, or sometimes to say just a few words so that other know we understand.

I have found it deeply moving to see those who have lost a partner say just a few words to Heather, to acknowledge their understanding, and deep compassion.

We may think we have done nothing special, yet a few words may be everything. If we gently draw others into such conversations, it can give them too a chance to name their experiences. In so doing, we become a community that shares the light of Christ, *in us can be life, and the life that is the light of all people, we can be a light that shines in the darkness, and that the darkness will not overcome (John 1.4-5).*

There are many ways in which we can be prophetic. We often forget how prophetic Christ was, being prophetic is an essential part of our calling to follow Christ.

In a rare glimpse of organisation, I have included two prayers relating to this sermon in the pew sheet. Please, don't turn to it, but you will find the second one at the end of the service. It is a well known prayer by Thomas Merton. He wrote at '*a dark time in his life*'. For me it expresses a good day! A member of the staff of the Centre for Action and Contemplation wrote the other, it recalls some of the many types of prophet needed in today's world:

Where, O where, are the prophets, when we need them, O Lord?

Where are the brave ones who will speak truth to power?

Where are the anointed women and men who will
refuse weapons of war?

Where are the women who stand at the cross in silent
resistance against the systems that execute and crucify?

Where, O where, are the prophets?

We bring this entreaty to you today because you are
our God.

Help us to become prophetic in action, prophetic in
witness, prophetic in love.

In Jesus' name. Amen.