This is only the third time that I have ascended these steps. On the first two occasions, the then Dean had invited me to preach here at St Peter's on Pouhere Sunday, when we celebrate the three-Tikanga nature of our Church's constitution, and somewhat later on Stewardship Sunday. Since it was these two special Sundays, I began to wonder if there was a pattern emerging here; get the lay canon to preach on days which the clergy felt awkward about. What was going to be next? Trinity?

I'm very grateful to Dean Julian that he has allowed me to pick a Sunday in what is called Ordinary time, because this is a period where what is talked about and what Scripture is read is not so much constrained by the focus of a special season of the Church's year or some special day. I've been free to talk about a topic of my own choosing and to select readings which go with that topic.

You have probably worked out from the readings, that I want to talk about Jonah. I've developed a particular relationship with the book of Jonah. Firstly, though my involvement with the Bible Society project to produce a new Māori translation of the Bible, not simply a revision of earlier versions, but one based on the original sources. One of the books I have translated as part of the project is Jonah. Secondly, after years of unsuccessfully trying to learn Hebrew by myself, I enrolled by distance in a Hebrew language course at Otago University. The book we read as a set text in that course was Jonah. Going through the detail of this text has given me a real insight into the value of the book as literature.

In terms of the language used, the construction of the whole story, and the poetry of chapter 2, Jonah is a very artfully composed text, though in detail it leaves a number of unanswered puzzles.

It is of course a well-known story, especially the fish episode, though this is only one incident, and almost a minor one, in a much more complex story. God instructs Jonah, a prophet, to go to Nineveh to preach repentance for their evil ways and warn them of destruction, if they do not comply. Jonah's response is to try to flee from God and His call, by taking a ship to far-away Tarshish at the other end of the Mediterranean. God raises such a storm that there is real danger that the ship will founder, and the crew, discovering that it is Jonah's fault, throw him overboard. In the water he is swallowed by a big fish in whose stomach he remains for three days.  Jonah repents of his attempted flight and is ejected on dry land by the fish.

A second time, God's call comes to Jonah, and this time he obeys, goes to Nineveh, and preaches so effectively that the whole city, from the king down,

repents with fasting, sackcloth and ashes. God then in accordance with His word relents of His intention to destroy the city. The final episode of the story is what was read as our first reading this morning.

Unlike all the other prose books of the Old Testament, this is not history, law, or prophecy, but fiction, a short story, a parable, composed by its author to make some very significant points.

Jonah, son of Amitai, was an historical figure, mentioned as a prophet in 2Kg 14:25. He is also the only one of the minor OT prophets mentioned in the Quran, where most of the familiar story is also recounted. Until 2014, when it was destroyed by ISIS, there was a shrine to Nabi Yunus (Prophet Jonah) in Mosul, appropriately the modern city on the site of the historical Nineveh. Before it was destroyed it was a pilgrimage site for Muslims, Jews, and Christians of the Middle East. The great city of Nineveh, in its day the greatest city of the world and capital of the Babylonian empire, thus the historical enemy of Israel and Judah, was itself destroyed in the 7th C BC. Nineveh and Jonah are both in the distant past relative to the time of the composition of the book, in the period after the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon. But the writer needed both a great city, the antithesis of Israel in its day, and a contemporary prophet to make the points he wanted to convey.

What I believe these points are is a series of lessons God teaches Jonah, by extension Israel as His chosen people, and by further extension, us, who claim to be God's people and thus the successors of Israel. An interesting feature of these lessons is that Jonah already knows them and can articulate them, but must still be taught their real content and their consequences. Despite knowing them, he doesn't act as if he believes them.

Jonah knows he's a prophet, but when he's given a mission by God, he doesn't just argue his incompetence as some other prophets did, nor did he just refuse to carry it out, he deliberately set out to remove himself from God's jurisdiction. God can't let him get away with this, and short of physically turning the ship around, God does the only thing He can to keep Jonah on the job. He gets him thrown off the ship and provides transport back home to start again. The time spent in the fish gives Jonah the chance to learn from the experience. The psalm which makes up almost all of chapter 2 is a dramatic tool to portray the time it takes for Jonah to take the lesson to heart.

The message here to Jonah is: You're a prophet, prophesy when you're told to. To Israel, God's chosen people, the light to the nations (Isa 42.5); be that light! We are God's ransomed/adopted people, the salt of the earth, we must show the light and be the salt in all we do! Or in the words of the prayerbook 'be what we claim to be'.

Secondly: As I mentioned, the book was composed in the post-exilic period, long after the time of its setting, and at a time when the notion that Yahweh was a local god, a god, though the supreme one, among many local gods, and the god of a particular people was being replaced by a universal monotheism. No longer would one say, 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' The Lord's song can be sung anywhere.

Jonah knows this; when he is challenged by the sailors, he confesses to being the servant of Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land, an expression which conventionally means 'everything'. However, his act of flight shows that though he can articulate this creedal statement, he hasn't really absorbed and committed to it; he acts as if he actually believes he can escape from the dominion of God.

This story reminds Israel and us that God is not restricted to a place, e.g. a country, a city, or a building, but is the power behind all places and people and all existence. We claim to know this, but do we always act or think as if it's true?

Third lesson: The fourth chapter, which have just heard read, is interesting in a number of ways. Here we learn for the first time why Jonah tried to flee; it is because he knew that God is a merciful compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and relents about inflicting disaster. What we still don't know is why this is a problem for Jonah, and there have been suggestions from commentators about this.

1. Jonah knew that if Nineveh repented, it would be spared, and thus his prediction about its destruction would turn out to be a false prophecy, injuring his reputation as a prophet.

2. or Jonah knows that God is merciful but resents that mercy being shown to anyone but the chosen people, especially to the great enemy of the chosen people.

3. or thirdly, that Jonah is just selfish, did he stay to watch what was going to happen out of schadenfreude? That Jonah is a selfish character is shown particularly in his reaction in the story of the plant.

The plant arises quite spontaneously, without any effort on Jonah's part, and provides him with shelter. When God causes it to wither, he is as resentful as he was about the mercy shown to Nineveh, so God has to shame him by the comparison; if he can feel strongly about a plant for which he had no responsibility, surely it is right for God to be concerned about the fate of a huge city full of people who did not share Israel's advantage of knowledge of right and wrong.

The words Jonah uses to describe God, that He is a merciful compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, and relents about inflicting disaster. are a very close repetition of formulae found in Exodus, Ps 145, Joel, Jeremiah, and elsewhere. Commentators identify them as a sort of ritual expression, along the lines perhaps of God's designation in the Quranic text, as 'Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful'. Jonah can say this, but doesn't understand the scope of what he is saying and must be taught this by God in this last chapter

God's mercy is not for us to allot, Israel and Christians have no prior claim on God's mercy; we can never take a position of 'holier than thou', or tacitly assume than anyone is outside the reach of God's mercy. Again, these are things we know and can assent to, but treating all people as if they are true, and seeing God and His mercy in everyone is something we fall down on all the time. One only has to think of those American self-proclaimed Christians who shout out that 'God hates gays', or the example of again a 'Christian' nurse who greatly distressed a dying elderly woman by claiming that she would be denied heaven unless she consistently addressed God in her prayers as 'Jehovah'. These are perhaps extreme examples of some people's exclusive and self-centred attitude to God's mercy, but there are innumerable subtler ways in which we place limits on the scope of God's love and mercy.

Thanks be to God for His inestimable love and mercy.

- *Ray Harlow*