

Epiphany 3 25th January
Jonah 3:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

What can we make of the tale of the whale?

What can we make of the tale of the whale? For most of us, the Sunday school story of Jonah is one of those Biblical stories that stretches credibility. So for today — and this may disappoint you — I'm saying - forget the fish (it's not necessarily a whale anyway). This story is not about the fish; it is about God.

It's easy to get distracted by the "is this true?" question that some might want to ask and to dismiss the deeper meanings of the story because of its implausibility. But the more life giving questions are: what can we learn about ourselves in relationship to God, and how might this speak to our lives in this day and age, regardless of how improbable we might think the story?

A recap on the story: Jonah – possibly an obscure Galilean prophet, was a man established in the faith of Israel. His story opens with the word of the Lord coming to him: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city and cry out against it".

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, Israel's traditional enemy. You mention Nineveh, and you are speaking of a pagan place of evil. It was known to be an awful place, with awful inhabitants and rulers - sinful, oppressive, cruel. There was no way that Jonah wanted to go to this city and preach judgment.

So Jonah hops on a ship to Tarshish –the glamorous legendary Gold Coast of the ancient world– a much better place to go, a place imagined to be much more generously welcoming of prophets, and –most importantly for Jonah -a long way in the opposite direction from Nineveh. There's a mighty storm, and Jonah is tossed overboard. The Lord then provides a large fish to swallow up Jonah; then presumably finding him indigestible, spews him up three days later. Now Jonah was finally ready to go to Nineveh.

When coupled with the Gospel story from St Mark about the calling of Jesus' first disciples, this is a story about hearing God's call and how we may respond to that call. Leave everything and follow immediately, like the disciples, or resist and flee, like Jonah?

Jonah had no problems *hearing* this word from God, but God is asking him to go somewhere and do something that he doesn't want to do. The story makes it clear he's fleeing not just from Nineveh, but from God-self –in Jonah chapter 1 we read: "Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord".

Here's where we can begin to touch base with Jonah. But Jonah's story isn't going to mean anything if we think that this notion of God calling us is as mythical as this story appears to be. It seems we can talk generally and easily enough about seeing or sensing God's *presence* in many aspects of our lives, from the beauty of nature to the kindnesses of people, or those holy, other-worldly moments which church-goers and non-church-goers alike experience.

But when we talk about a “call” as something more specific – a communication that is directly between God and oneself –we can tune out. Some may hesitate about or reject the notion of God being real or a God who actually speaks; many want to keep God at a safe distance away from our lives, or we may believe that a calling from God is for a different kind of person, not us. A little delve into the pages of the Gospels shows fishermen, crooked tax collectors, social outcasts all hearing and responding to Christ’s call – Christ the Son of God choosing very ordinary and unexpected sorts of people to join in with his mission; a pattern that has continued across the centuries.

We can talk of the “still small voice of God”, or of internal promptings, ideas –sometimes quite improbable – that won’t go away, that stir us deep within. We have dreams. There are a myriad of ways that God may be speaking with us, calling us, inviting us specifically to join his mission of transforming the world with his wholeness, love, peace and justice. This is not a joining like belonging to an organisation where we can do good, or even belonging to a church. This is about new life –about being transformed by God’s Spirit, about being part of Christ’s own body, about *being* Church.

Every single person baptized into Christ’s body, the church, is called by God into service in his kingdom; is called into the mission of sharing the life of Christ which we are empowered to live by God’s Spirit who is with us. Every one of us, even little Patrick and Jocelyn being baptized today. That call is paramount and given –there’s not going to be a special call to live the kind of life expected of people who have been joined with Christ in baptism. What’s expected? Lives that exhibit God-given capacities for forgiveness, for love, for prophetic challenging of injustice, for peace, and for building up Christ’s body, the Church, and encouraging other followers in their journeys. But because this is what Christ gave his life for, and because we’re so inclined to resist, God will offer both reminder calls to put Christ at the centre of our lives, and invitations to discover more of what belonging to Christ can mean in our lives and to the world around us. And of course, there may be very specific vocational calls for us.

And our responses will vary from immediate “yeses” (like Simon and Andrew and James and John in the Gospel reading) to blocking our ears and running away, like Jonah. A heart-felt “yes” response will undoubtedly mean some life changes; and how we can resist change!

The story of Jonah, in all its grand caricature, exposes our great capacity to resist God. We’ve all done it: We have better plans for our lives, or we’ll get round to doing whatever about God, about church, later. There are so many roads we can take, so many choices we can make. Sunday sleep-ins are chosen over the focused time of worshipping God in a community of faith, other religions and philosophies are explored without the same exploration of the depths of relationship to God through Christ. There are so many Tarshishes that offer excitement, advantages, the means to financial comfort and success, status and so on. What is often regarded as Nineveh –to be avoided- are lives spent in God’s ways of sacrificial self-giving, humility and disregard for material success. Whilst sometimes admired, but often cynically ridiculed, consistently and intentionally living that way living isn’t aspired to. We pick and choose who to forgive and when to be generous.. And why do something if you’re not going to gain something, or if you’re not

going to be recognized and thanked? These things are very, very sad when seen in the lives of Christ's people.

The world we experience in 21st century Australia values success, status, material possessions, and an individualism that puts self first. If that's where and what we tune into and are influenced by, chances are God's call won't be heard. It'll be drowned out by the voices in our own heads that are cheering us on in the values of this world.

Ending for Baptismal Service

The story of Jonah can show us the choices we have – the bright and popular lights and lifestyle of Tarshish or the difficult road of self sacrificial Nineveh? What the world aspires to, or what God calls us to? Follow or flee? There isn't really a middle ground.

Jocelyn and Patrick begin on their journeys of faith today. What is it that we can model to them in the choices they will inevitably confront to either follow or forego Christ? Can we offer ourselves as living, vibrant, realistic examples of what responding to Christ is about?

We sang as we began our service today, and these questions remain:

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown
in you and you in me?*

Amen.

Ending for 8am Service

But one thing is sure: God in his abundant generosity and grace will persistently pursue us, as he did Jonah, calling our names, calling us to turn around, calling us to new life.

During this season of Epiphany, as we contemplate God's revelation of himself and the ways in which we hear his voice calling us, consider how you hear, and how you respond. The story of Jonah can show us the choices we have – the bright and popular lights and lifestyle of Tarshish or the difficult road of self sacrificial Nineveh? What the world aspires to, or what God calls us to? Follow or flee? There isn't really a middle ground.