

St. Michael's Parish Church
Sunday 25th January 2008
Jonah 3: 1 – 10, Mark 1: 14 – 20

The story of Jonah and the whale must be one of the most familiar Bible stories to everyone. It has been told and retold to children for generations and it may have been stuck in your mind ever since childhood.

That story, which we know so well from our childhood centres around Jonah and the whale, or in fact as the Bible actually says, Jonah and a big fish. The well-known part of the story is Jonah's misfortune, after trying to thwart God's command to him, to be swallowed by the fish and regurgitated onto land,

'Then the Lord spoke to Jonah and the fish spewed Jonah out on to the dry land.' (2:10)

That is the point at which the story we learnt in childhood usually stops, but at that point we are only half way through the story. After this the story becomes more serious, or at least it has a much more serious point to it.

We might say that although the whole story is written throughout in the same very appealing style it is at the point when Jonah is spewed forth by the fish that the story stops being a children's story and becomes an adult story.

To help us appreciate this there are three things that are very striking about the adult story of Jonah. First of all in delivering the message of condemnation and destruction to the people of the city of Nineveh Jonah never mentions God – and that is an unusual thing to do for a prophet.

The second thing that happens is the mass conversion of the people of Nineveh. Jonah goes to them and delivers a message demanding that they repent. And that is exactly what all the people of the city do. Once again that is unusual – it is not what usually happens when a prophet of doom comes calling, and it certainly wasn't what Jonah was expecting.

The third thing that is unusual is that once they have repented God chooses not to destroy the city and that to upsets Jonah terribly. Usually prophets are very pleased when God acts, but for Jonah God's actions – God's forgiveness and mercy - are so upsetting that he considers suicide.

The subject of this story, of course, is not really the Ninevehites, nor is the story even about God. It is about Jonah. It is about Jonah, the prophet, who follows his own agenda – he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place and when he does go there he is spiteful and wishes for the city's destruction for all the trouble it has caused him.

This story about Jonah is a story about becoming upset when the people we don't like or people who are our enemies receive salvation. Jonah doesn't believe the people of Nineveh have the right to be considered as God's people, even if they do turn from their evil ways. Jonah is reluctant to carry the grace of God beyond the boundaries that he considers to be acceptable. He wants the people he doesn't like to suffer because he doesn't like them. Jonah's mission is not one of salvation, but condemnation.

The relevant part of this story for us today is the question that God puts to Jonah at the end of the whole story. That question is one that we have to answer time and again in the present time. God asks,

Should I not be sorry for the great city of Nineveh and all its people?

Should I not be a God of salvation rather than condemnation? Asks God.

The difference between God and Jonah is that Jonah has his own self-interest at heart – Jonah couldn't care less about the fate of Nineveh – whereas God has Nineveh's best interests at heart.

How common, and how relevant, is the moral of this ancient story in our personal lives, our public life and our political lives? How common is the moral of this ancient story in our own lives full of our own personal dislikes – do we want our enemies or those we dislike to receive salvation or to receive condemnation – their just deserts? How common is the moral of this ancient story in our public lives? Does the tabloid press wish to see saved those it considers immoral or wrong or incompetent. Is the tabloid press not too quick to judge, condemn and destroy? What about our political system? Does our state's judicial system seek to punish rather than reform and what is its approach to foreign policy – are our wars about salvation or destruction; were we saving Iraq or trying to destroy it?

Just as with Jonah it is rarely the best outcome for everyone that motivates our attitudes and our beliefs, our actions and our justice. It is rarely the good of our neighbour or our foe that motivates our opinions and our condemnation. Like Jonah what most often motivates us in our personal, public or political life is our own self-interest. And too often our own self-interest leads us to judge, condemn and destroy rather than try to do the more difficult and complex mental manoeuvre of understanding, empathising and forgiving - saving.

Perhaps there isn't a more compelling or a more relevant example of the Jonah story today than the inauguration of Barak Obama this week. After eight years of policies both at home and abroad that were designed to divide the country and the world between, in the words of the last President, those who were for us – the saved, and those who were against us, the condemned – Barak Obama's public speeches, from the very first one that brought him to the attention of the American people to his inauguration speech on Tuesday, have been consistent in their attempt to express the ideal of the search for common cause and common purpose, not just in America, but in the world.

Whereas George Bush sought to divide America between Republican's and Democrats, Christians and Muslims Barak Obama's rhetoric is all about finding common cause.

But, Jonah isn't all about national politics or international affairs. The moral of the story can be expressed in what we do in our local communities. Rather than difference or right and wrong, or narrow self interest there is common cause to be found there as well.

One of the most important things about being a part of St. Michael's is that we search for common cause amongst our Christian neighbours. The Parish Grouping, which has been developing for four years now continues to grow. This afternoon we all have the opportunity to take part in its development at the congregational conference at St. Colm's after this service.

The Parish Grouping is an example of local churches of different denominations making use of their own self-interest to work together for the good of everyone – the churches and the community.

In other places, in other communities between other churches congregations see other churches congregations that are to be judged for their misplaced theology, different worship style or different denominational affiliation.

That should not be the case here in this part of Edinburgh. The churches of this area have much to gain individually and together by discovering the different strengths that each congregation has and supporting each other in our weaknesses. That is how we find common cause.

Jesus' good news message was a message of salvation rather than condemnation. Follow me he said, not to the gates of destruction, but into the arms of a God who wants to see you succeed. Whether it is in our personal relationships with other people, our public discourse, our national relationships, or our church life Jesus calls us to not to judge, condemn and destroy others, but rather to find ways to make common cause with others in our mutual self-interest of salvation.