

**Chichester Cathedral**  
**The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity (Mattins) 22 August 2010**

When the great fish spewed Jonah out upon the dry land, I wonder who was on the beach? This morning I want to reflect on the spirituality of the package holiday, in relation both to Jonah and the Jesus of Revelation chapter one, the one who bears ‘the keys of Death and of Hades.’

Nowadays the so-called ‘All-inclusive’ holiday is increasingly popular. Once in your hotel, the bracelet around your wrist means you can eat and drink as much as you like without any further cost. This completes the sense of living in a temporary bubble where the usual chores and stresses of everyday life are entirely absent, replaced by sunshine and relaxation. Not only no work to do, but no cooking, shopping, cleaning or washing up. No e-mail or telephone, no need even to carry money. And if my Tunisian hotel was anything to go by, a recent English newspaper or news bulletin can be pretty hard to come by. Information about the floods in Pakistan took several days to filter through, and it was only on returning to England that the full enormity of it all started to hit home.

The package holiday, then, is a deliberate disconnection from day to day responsibilities. Even holiday reading tends to be escapist, and most holidaymakers won’t be troubling themselves with questions about the lives, working conditions and wages of the cleaners, cooks and waiters who make the whole thing possible. Nor of the impact of tourism on the host country, and indeed the environment.

I may be sounding more critical than I mean to be. After all, we all need opportunities for rest and refreshment. Genesis tells us the need for sabbatarian recuperation is part of who God has made us to be, and indeed the Gospels record Jesus regularly taking time away from his disciples and the crowds. One of the great themes of Christian theology is of finding true rest only in God: ‘Our hearts are restless’ prayed St Augustine, ‘until they find their rest in thee.’ And if we are lucky enough to experience something of this divine restfulness now, it is a foretaste of the kingdom of God, of the heaven where all our striving ceases and our only responsibility is praise and adoration.

I have spoken about holidays in terms of disconnection. But the whole point is to refresh us enough to *reconnect* with our daily lives, renewed and reinvigorated. The point of other kinds of disconnection, such as the Cathedral quiet day or retreat, are explicitly for reconnecting with and refreshing our relationship with God.

There are also negative forms of disconnection, such as a wish to permanently avoid responsibilities and difficulties. Jonah was asked to go to Nineveh, to help bring the people of that great city to its senses. A last minute holiday in Tarshish seemed a much better bet, for what had the people of Nineveh to do with him? God is not so easily put off, however, and poor old Jonah ended up cast into the sea and swallowed

by a large fish. In this morning's reading he compares this experience to being in the belly of Sheol, the place of the dead, far from the presence of God. But even from such a place Jonah's voice is heard, and he is brought up from the depths to dry land.

Compare Jonah to Jesus, asked by his Father to bring Israel and the entire human race to its senses. He accepts the task, and despite the suffering it brings him, sees it through to the end. In Revelation 1 he has returned to the bosom of his Father, where he is alive for ever, having earned the undoubted right to bear the keys of Death and of Hades.

Because of the crucifixion and resurrection this is so much more than just an impressive sounding phrase. And yet note the wording – not just the keys of Death, but Death *and Hades*, that is the Greek word for Sheol, the place of the dead, which Christians call 'Hell'. In this service we have affirmed the Apostles Creed, with its mysterious wording about descending into Hell. Think of it like this: on Good Friday, Christ experiences a human death. On Holy Saturday he experiences what it is like to actually be dead, in a place of darkness and silence, cut off from the living and from God.

It's commonly said Christ's supreme test was when his obedience to God meant facing crucifixion. But when God had asked his Son to bear such horror, there was still more required. Obedience in life was not enough; obedience in death was required too. Having lived an earthly human life, Christ was asked to enter the place of forsakenness and death.

When Christ descends into hell, he experiences everything that is the opposite of God: all darkness, abandonment and despair. In so doing he is able to redeem even the most terrible of human experiences, for he has shared not only the human experience of dieing, but also of being dead. How could God connect more deeply with us than that? And it is from this place of death that God raises his Son to new life. So the dark prison of hell becomes a way to the light of God, as the crucified one becomes the resurrected one.

Jonah didn't want to bear any responsibility for Nineveh, while Jesus accepted responsibility for both the living and the dead. His disciple, John, exiled on Patmos, is asked to bear responsibility for the seven churches of Asia. We are asked to accept responsibility for those around us, including the devastated people of Pakistan. We can cannot do this without times of rest and recuperation, times of reconnection and grace, but do it we must, until God finally calls us home to his eternal rest, in the presence of the first and the last, the living one who is alive for ever and ever, our Saviour Jesus Christ, AMEN.