

Mattins Sermon  
Sunday 10 March 2019

Jonah 3

Today is the first Sunday of our journey through Lent in which we are called to fast, pray and give.

It's a period during which we reflect on our lives, say sorry to God for the wrong things we have said and done, think back to our baptism and attempt to put things right with ourselves and with our neighbour. Put succinctly, it's a time to be made clean and right with God.

It has been suggested that the origins of spring cleaning date back to that ancient Jewish practice of thoroughly cleaning the home of leaven and crumbs the evening before Passover. The festival in which Jewish people recall the flight from captivity in Egypt to freedom and a new beginning with God.

As we turn to our Old Testament lesson this morning in Jonah chapter 3 we discover the cleansing and miraculous results of repentance.

One of the problems with Jonah is that people, especially scholars, tend to become preoccupied over whether it is fact or fiction, history or allegory, literal or parable. And various theories have evolved over Jonah's underwater experience. And yet in the Gospels we find, within the context of a conversation with the Pharisees on miraculous signs, Jesus refers to Jonah's physical presence inside the great sea creature for 3 days. He likens it to his bodily entombment before his resurrection.

Much is made of the miracle in chapter 2 when the sea creature deposits Jonah safe and sound onto dry land. But in chapter 3 there are actually 4 far greater miracles that really comprise the whole point of the book. And those 4 miracles are to do with repentance.

The word repentance derives from the Greek 'metanoia' meaning, a change of mind, to think differently, about God, about life, about ourselves, in fact about everything.

It's an experience in which we see our 'self' not as a person who is good, but someone who is actually quite bad. And God is someone we should not run away from - but who we should run to - in order to help us

change for the better. It's not simply about changing to become a 'nice' person who is lovely, kind and agreeable but it's about a change of attitude which leads ultimately to a change of action and a changed life.

So, the first miracle we discover is that of Jonah's repentance inside the sea creature. He examines his conscience, he realises just how low he has sunk, he repents and cries out to God to save him.

And it's in such crises situations we realise our own human frailty. That's when we cast off the veneer of our social respectability and discover who we 'really' are before God. And yet with all our faults God's forgiveness knows no bounds.

Although Jonah discovered that yes, God forgives, he does not let us off our responsibilities. But he allows us to go back and fulfil them properly. Forgiveness is not an easy way out - it is the right way out. So, Jonah must go to Nineveh, back to the job he ran away from. Because forgiveness not only puts us in a position to put things right with the past but also the present. It's as much concerned with obedience as disobedience. God doesn't forgive us so we can go away and repeat the same mistakes again. He forgives us in order to give us a new beginning – an authentic metanoia.

The second miracle was that of the Ninevites repentance. Nineveh was a great city. It was surrounded by a wall so wide that 3 chariots could be driven abreast on top of it. It was guarded by 1500 towers, 200 feet high. The battlements took 1 million 300 hundred slaves, 8 years to build and Nineveh accommodated 2 million inhabitants. It was a luxurious and decadent city, but it was also a wicked city. From archaeological research we discover just how vast and evil it was. It was renowned for its cruelty, affluence, murder and plunder. That's why they needed such a strongly fortified wall because they had made so many enemies. No wonder Jonah was afraid to publicly announce his message of, repent in 40 days, or you will be utterly destroyed.

But miraculously the Ninevites did repent and turn to God. And never has there been such a case of universal repentance in the course of human history on this scale. It only took one little man, who may have appeared a deathly shade of white after being bleached by the acid in the stomach of the sea creature for 3 days, to bring this terrible city to its knees. They threw aside their luxurious garments, put on sackcloth and repented before God.

The third miracle was that of the repentance of a pagan despot – the King. His leadership was totally corrupt, and he suddenly came to the realisation just how evil Nineveh was under his government. He stepped down from his throne, cast aside his opulent robes and put on sackcloth. He decreed that all of the city must do likewise. But actually, he was too late, the people had already repented of their own volition. Instead of starting from the top down God had begun from the bottom up and it was the ordinary people in the street who led the way. Because you can't pass a decree of universal penitence or make people good by act of parliament.

But the fourth miracle and most remarkable of all was that suggested by the King.

'Who knows - God may yet relent - and with compassion - turn from his fierce anger - so that we will not perish'.

When God looked down upon the vast city of repentant human beings, he felt compassion. The unchangeable God - did change his mind.

We worship a God who is just and compassionate, who is always ready to forgive and show mercy to people.

God has also given us an opportunity of 40 days during Lent to contemplate on our condition, individually and corporately, as a church, as a city, as a country. To pray, fast and to deliver us from the selfishness of our economic and social crises and to turn back to him.

Because Lent isn't about giving things up, its about giving ourselves back to God.

The Revd Dr Irene Smale, Cathedral Deacon: 10/03/19