

Online Reflection for 7th November 2021

Third Sunday before Advent

In our housegroup recently we have been looking at a series called 'Growing Older and Wiser'. One of the reflections was to look back over our life say 20 years ago and see if in hindsight, with the wisdom that comes with age, we would have done anything differently.

Some people feel that they have missed an opportunity or worse than that, done something they have regretted ever since: dropped out of school, married the wrong person, missed a job opportunity, messed up in some exams or started something that became an addiction. For everyone it will be different.

We all know at least part of the story of Jonah. The prophet Jonah messed up good and properly. He disobeyed God, ran away and got on a boat. He put the sailors' lives at risk, they had to lose their livelihood by throwing everything overboard, and they were in great fear because of the storm that was all Jonah's fault. They then had to, as far as they knew, kill Jonah by throwing him overboard although they tried every other option first. (Why couldn't Jonah have jumped overboard himself if he knew he was the cause of their problems?) Jonah as good as died but then, at the last minute, God rescued him. From inside the fish he recognised that God was the one who saved him despite his disobedience and he gave thanks.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time

The God of a second chance! I might have messed up in the past but now is an opportunity to do things differently, to be a better person and make wiser decisions.

God didn't give up on Jonah even though Jonah had disobeyed him and caused immense suffering to others around him. God gave him a second chance. This time Jonah obeyed. He wasn't very enthusiastic about it and afterwards he moaned like mad to God, but he did what God asked. Through Jonah the people of Nineveh had the chance to repent and be saved from destruction.

So, what was different the second time?

Firstly, Jonah was different. He had survived being thrown overboard and nearly drowning and then had had three days and nights alone in the great fish to pray and meditate. He realised that even when things were as bad as they could possibly get, God was there with him. Even in his disobedience, God cared for Him. Jonah wasn't happy with what God was asking him to do, but he had come to see that disobedience was far worse than obedience. He had learned something from his earlier mistakes.

Secondly, God simplified his instructions. The first time God said "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." The second time God just said, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give

you.” Sometimes we can get overwhelmed because of the immensity of the task we feel God is asking of us instead of just trusting God a step at a time.

However, even though this time he obeyed and went, Jonah still thought he knew better than God.

In Chapter 3v10 we read, *‘When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.’*

The next verse says *‘But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.’*

God gave Jonah a second chance but Jonah still didn’t believe that the Ninevites should be given a second chance. Are we ever tempted to tell God what he ought to do and how he should do it? We know that we are saved and one of God’s children but do we think that there are some people so bad they don’t deserve to be saved? This is what Jonah thought about the Ninevites.

Not only did God give Jonah a second chance, he also gave the people of Nineveh a second chance. No one is beyond God’s saving power. As Jesus was dying on the cross he offered a second chance to the criminal hanging next to him; *Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”* [Luke 23:43]

God is at work in this world but he is at work through ordinary people like us. Maybe we feel we are not good enough, or what God has asked us to do is just too hard. Maybe in the past we have run away or tried to ignore what God was saying to us. It’s not too late.

Maybe, like Jonah we have done things that have caused hurt and suffering to others. We can ask for forgiveness. We can move forward. We don’t have to live with regrets. I have seen people eaten up with bitterness because they are unable to accept that God has forgiven them and they can *‘forgive as the Lord has forgiven you’*

Our reading from Mark’s gospel is about Jesus calling fishermen to follow him – Peter, Andrew, James and John. They drop everything and immediately follow Jesus. The gospel writer says that Simon (Peter) and Andrew *‘At once they left their nets and followed him.’* James and John *‘left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.’*

In contrast to Jonah, they follow Jesus without questioning the calling. However, we know that over the next three years they do all have doubts. Peter denies Jesus, James and John argue over who should have the top job in God’s kingdom. They all desert Jesus during his trial and death. But, they are all given a second chance at Pentecost.

We can look at those around us, other Christians in church, and think that they are all better than us or more capable. But all Christians have struggles and doubts. All Christians get things wrong sometimes. We repent and we learn from our mistakes, then next time we can respond differently.

He is the God of the second chance!