

Jonah 3 – A Persistent God

'Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.'

What a momentous turnaround! God is a persistent God and Jonah is given a second chance. He grabs it, finally accepting the mission that God gives him. But, I wonder, have we gone quiet in sharing our faith today? We live in a culture that sees faith as a private matter, but have we lost our core story? 'Truth' has become relative – *'You show me your truth and I'll show you mine.'* But, in a culture which isn't overly conscious about guilt or going to church, there has been a shifting interest in spirituality since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The wonderful UK Blessing, where over 65 churches came together online to sing a blessing over our land, has had almost 4 million views and even made the 6 o'clock news. (You can watch it at the end of our service today.) If people are asking questions of faith, is this our time to speak up and be bolder about sharing the gospel?

As Jonah prepares to proclaim the message that God gives him, there is much that we can learn from this story. The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time but God graciously makes no reference to the prophet's previous failure. His words carry no rebuke for Jonah and no warning of what will happen if he fails to respond once again. Jonah is still free to say either 'Yes' or 'No', but it must be a huge relief that he *does* now do as God asks. He might be the only biblical prophet who had to have his assignment given twice, but he certainly wasn't the only one who was reluctant to receive it. Jonah was by no means the perfect prophet – he didn't have it altogether, but he was still called by God. And, as we share our faith, we share as people 'on the journey', not as people who 'have arrived'. Let's be careful not to disqualify ourselves from proclaiming Jesus.

Like Jonah, we share because we're a people called to 'go'. Jesus' great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel was for his disciples to *'Go, and make disciples'*, not to wait for people to come to them, and not much has changed in 2000 years. As Jesus was sent, as his disciples were sent - so are we. When Jonah goes, he literally has to walk to Nineveh, a journey of about 900 miles across desert routes. And, in going, he crosses lots of boundaries: the obvious geographical ones, but there were others too. He crossed the cultural

and religious boundaries between Israelite and Gentile, between the holy and the unclean, the sacred and the profane. He would also pass from being one of the righteous who stood in the presence of God to being an alien in a strange world. But, in crossing boundaries, Jonah discovered that God had already been that way. Mission can sometimes involve taking risks, crossing boundaries, travelling into strange and frightening places, only to discover that God is already there.

Assyria had suffered many plagues and famines before Jonah turned up, and you wonder if this prepared the people for Jonah's message and their response. We know that God didn't send Covid-19. Let me repeat that – God definitely did *not* send the pandemic – but God can redeem that of which he is not the architect. If the pandemic has increased people's willingness to listen, in what ways can we respond to this? Can you send a note to a neighbour, or someone you know on the frontline, and ask: '*Is there anything we can pray for you about?*' Particularly now that the focus has reduced a little, in that we're no longer clapping the NHS and carers on Thursday evenings. Who knows what opportunities may arise.

There is no doubt that Nineveh was a very intimidating place. It's described as '*the great city*', and we learnt in chapter one of its great wickedness. But God can help us reach the hard places. The name of Nineveh is on God's lips at both the start and the end of the book of Jonah, but God is bigger than the hard places and hard people to reach. What and who do we regard as the hard places and people in our communities? Who have we stopped praying for?

In verse 2, God tells Jonah to '*... proclaim to it the message I give you.*' This is a double emphasis – proclaim the proclamation. And it teaches us that sharing our faith involves ... *sharing our faith*. But our walking must also be our preaching; words alone will not do. Sharing our faith does involve saying something, of course it does. But it involves living it too and people must get a sense of how our faith impacts our daily life if it's to have integrity and be authentic. Our lives must reflect our message. Verse 3 begins: '*Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh*', and it's *as* he obeyed and went that he became a prophet to Nineveh. People look to the church to see Jesus, and we're called to live out his message.

At its heart, this message is *good news*. But that can hardly be said of Jonah's message to the Ninevites. It's a message which, on first hearing, is hardly hopeful. Jonah gives this great city warning of their overthrow. They are given

forty days' notice of impending doom. There's no call to repentance; no good news in Jonah's announcement. And, if Nineveh was anything like the city that records tell us it was - remember the Assyrians were regarded as the 'Nazi storm-troopers of the ancient world - I certainly wouldn't have wanted to have been in Jonah's shoes as he delivered God's message.

The turning point comes in verse 5: *'The Ninevites believed God.'* And, at this point, you want a cheer to go up! Everything so far has led to this point, and the rest of the story is a working out of the consequences for Jonah of God's response to Nineveh's repentance. Without this response on the part of the people of Nineveh, there would be no tale to tell. Therefore, much deserves to be made of it. Indeed, Jonah had barely finished speaking before *'the people believed God'*. Instantaneously their actions reflect their belief: they proclaim a fast and cover themselves with sackcloth and their king commands everyone to give up their evil ways. This was no half-hearted or shallow response, but a change of heart which involved everything.

You wonder if Jonah was freaked out by their response. Even the animals were wearing sackcloth! And I wonder why we're afraid of sharing our faith with others, if it can lead to such transformation. Do we even talk about people being lost today, as the Ninevites were? And do we have any expectation that anything could be different if we only plucked up the courage to share the good news with them? If a reluctant prophet can change the direction of a wicked city of 120,000 inhabitants by boldly proclaiming God's message, do we need to share our faith fully, and with expectation? The reality is, if we reach a lot of people, then they will change the church. They will probably sit in the pew that Christ gave you! Jonah was most probably very surprised by the Ninevites' response, and we must equally be prepared to be surprised.

At the end of the chapter, we read that *'When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion on them and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.'* There was no guarantee, of course, that Nineveh's fasting would bring about the desired response. God was their only hope. They believed that the God proclaimed by Jonah had the power to deliver them from impending disaster. They also believed that their evil and God's fierce anger were connected, and that their change of heart might create a change of heart in God. A very bold belief – but one that we're told paid off. They cast themselves on his mercy and discover one of the most wonderful truths lying at the heart of the book of Jonah, and that is that God

turns to those who turn to him. Even more wonderful is the truth that he doesn't turn away from those who, like Jonah, turn away from him. He is a persistent God, who always seeks to be in relationship with those he loves.

So, let us live as those who are called to share God's message, but to live it out as well as being willing to speak it. And let's prepare ourselves to be surprised by the result. God is good all the time: all the time God is good!