

Sermon 19th July 2020

Forty-four years later the embarrassment of it all still causes me to blush. It was that time of year when we practiced for our Primary school dance. I was ten years old and it was the girls turn choose their dance partner. One by one my friends were chosen, sometimes dragged kicking and screaming on to the dance floor until all the girls had chosen and I alone remained sitting on the bench. I ended up dancing with the teacher, who smelled funny and strangely lacked any skill in dancing. Yes, I did get a very hard time from my friends.

I think we can all empathise with the feelings of embarrassment at not being chosen and the resultant question that arises what's wrong with me? There is an inevitable conclusion that we have in some way failed to live up to the other persons expectations, desires or needs, we are simply not good enough for them.

As we look at prodigal prophet's psalm in chapter two, we will find that God turns this idea of not being good enough to be chosen on its head. This week thought could be titled "You don't have to be perfect to be saved".

The book of Jonah is about God seeking to save those Ninevites who were openly plotting against Him, who were His enemies and glorifying in all that offends and grieves God, their sins. God chose Jonah to bring His message to the Ninevites and that is where the problems start. There is rebellion, defiance and petulant sulking and all this from the man of God, God's own Prophet Jonah. In fact, everyone and everything else seems to be doing exactly what they should; the sinful Ninevites repent, the pagan sailors turn and worship the one true God, the fish turns up on time and even the wind and waves obey God.

Last week we saw Jonah telling the sailors to throw him in the sea rather than turn the boat around and head back to Joppa. Jonah preferred death to obeying God. Jonah chose His sin, His way, His rebellion over obedience to God and at that moment Jonah could not have been anymore an enemy in his mind to God than he was. Then over the side he goes the prodigal prophet and splash that should have been that, no more

Jonah and yet it wasn't. In that moment of Jonah's spiteful, pitiful rebellion God steps in and saves Jonah.

God stepped in save both the Ninevites and Jonah not because they asked, not because they deserved it and no not even because they would later be of use to Him. God stepped in to save Jonah and Ninevites simply because He saw those whom He loves in danger unable able to save themselves. This is God's heart to save those whom he loves, to save those that cannot save themselves.

It is interesting to note the method of God saving Jonah is a huge fish a bit unconventional don't you think. God could have used something traditional like a piece of floating wood or a barrel or even a passing ship, however God chose to use a huge fish. It makes you wonder why he chose the fish, well if you are here next week you will find out why.

So, let's talk about the elephant in the room or more accurately the fish that swallowed Jonah. The book of Jonah really struggles to get taken seriously because people just can't or won't accept Johan fishy lifeboat. Scholars have labelled the book metaphorical or allegorical for no other reason than they can't accept God's means of saving Jonah. Of course, their rejection of Jonah authenticity flies in the face of the evidence from within the book itself and from sources outside the book that testify to the fact that Jonah was a real person, and this is his real story. Then there are those who try to explain the fish swallowing Jonah as a perfectly possible natural phenomena. They will cite cases from the 1800's of men being swallowed by whales and being found alive days later. As a point of interest there are no authenticated cases of people being swallowed by whales or fish and emerging alive and unharmed three days later other than in the book of Jonah.

God's salvation for Jonah was miraculous and it needs to be understood as being a miracle. If you accept God's own testimony that He is the creator and sustainer of all the universe, is it all that difficult to believe He provided this miraculous fish to save Jonah?

If we accept that Jonah's rescue was a miracle, we have to accept it demonstrates God's premeditated desire to seek and save those whom he loves. We find this truth expressed in the Jonah's Psalm when he states, *"Salvation comes from the Lord"*. This is heartbeat of the Book of Jonah, this is the heart beat of God, this is the heart beat of our call to worship this morning, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Jesus, God's only Son, came to save the world, and here the world encompasses all mankind, not just a select few as Jonah thought. Jesus came to save us because we are all just like Jonah are rebellious and defiant breakers of God's commands and laws. As Paul puts it so starkly and unequivocally in Romans 3: 10 - 12 *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."* Jesus came to save us because we are all sinners guilty before God and justly condemned to perish. Jesus came to save you and I from God's judgement just as God was sending Jonah to the Ninevites so they too may be saved from His righteous judgement.

Paul writes in Romans 3: 15 – 16 *"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know."* Last week saw how Jonah's disobedience caused suffering and misery for all those around him as well as himself. Our disobedience to God, our sin only ever leads to ruin and misery; that is the final unalterable destination on the road of disobedience to God and our sin. Jesus came to save us from this final utter ruin to give us the opportunity to have a different life filled not filled with misery but filled with joy, peace and fulfilment for us and those around us.

Jesus also came to save our physical world, His creation. The word translated "world" John 3:16 carries both the idea of all the peoples of the world as well as "all of creation". Man's disobedience to God not only lead to a life of misery, ruin and judgement for mankind it also meant that all of creation became subject to the same misery and ruin. God wants to heal his creation, to lift the stain of man's disobedience from. It is remarkable that even in its ruined and miserable condition creation still testifies to the Creator, to His glory and magnificence.

It is finished, words Jesus spoke as he hung betrayed, broken and battered on a cross outside Jerusalem as he took His last breath. These words were a defiant statement of triumph and the full stop to John 3: 16. Jesus had accomplished God's mission, His death on the cross has opened the gates of salvation for those who choose to trust in His saving work. The cross lies at the heart of all human history in the same way that Jonah's proclamation "Salvation come from the Lord" lies at the heart of the Book of Jonah. God choose a fish to save Jonah from drowning God chose His Son's death on the cross to save you and I and all creation from misery and ruination.

Let me remind you that God did all this to save us whilst we were still His enemies. Isn't it absolutely outrageous that God cares so much for those who despise and reject Him that He was willing see His son die in torment on the cross for you and I?

Many people struggle to accept Jesus' death on the cross, their struggles very much like those who struggle with the authenticity of the book of Jonah. They struggle to accept this is how God would save "all the peoples of the world", to put it mildly it is just foolish. Paul addresses this scepticism in his first letter to the church in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 1: 23 *"but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,"*

In the previous verse, Paul wrote of the two main cultural forces of his era: religious Jews and intellectual Greeks. He said that the Jews wanted a saviour who would free them from Roman oppression and would lead them in victory over all the nations of the world. Not a carpenter's son who died on a Roman cross. The Greeks The Greeks wanted a saviour who was slick, clever and mighty not an unknown Jew who died on a Roman Cross. The Jews and the Greeks couldn't accept God's means of salvation for them.

Ultimately the Greek and Jewish struggles with Gods chosen means of saving all mankind were borne out of a realisation that salvation is not about human effort or human intellect or what race you are or what your social station in life is or how religious you are or even how good you are. Salvation begins and ends with God.

So why preach this message this morning Keith you may be asking, well because we all need to be reminded of the truth from time to time. If we forget the truth error can creep in. We need to be reminded that "Salvations come from God" and that he chose to save us whilst we were at our very worst. You don't have to be perfect to be saved.

This morning I would challenge you put your name in John 3:16 *"For God so loved Keith that he gave his one and only Son, that if Keith believes in Him, he shall not perish but have eternal life."* Say it to yourself a couple of times and let the enormity of it sink in and realise God did all this because he loves you.

As Christians we are the first chosen on the great dance floor of God's creation.