

# Homily for People and Parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2024, Epiphany 3

Readings: **Jonah 3:1-10**

**Psalms 62:5-12**

1Corinthians 7:29-31

**Mark 1:14-20**

I wonder who would come to your mind if asked you to name some heroes of faith in the Bible? And of those... which ones you identify with in some way?

In the New Testament I think of John the Baptist who was long-haired, gaunt, and utterly uncompromising; and the fiercely intelligent and articulate Paul after his Damascus road conversion. There is part of me that would love to be more like them – but I probably identify much more with Peter. Peter who occasionally got things right, but more often got them wrong! Peter who walked on water, but who denied knowing his friend three times. Peter who affirmed Jesus as Messiah, and yet struggled to accept that sacrifice was necessary. Peter who was a long way from perfect... like you and me!

The Old Testament reading today tells us about another person who was a long way from perfect... and yet who God called to do something significant. When God called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh and assure them that they would be destroyed because of their behaviour, Jonah did not respond with enthusiasm. He was not like John the Baptist fiercely demanding that people needed to 'Repent!' and he did not offer intelligent argument to the leaders of a community like Paul. He knew it would be hard and that his life would be at risk, so he got on a ship travelling in the opposite direction in an attempt to run away. That's when things really heated up for Jonah!

In the story we are told that a great storm came upon the ship and Jonah intuited that the storm had come from God because he was going in the wrong direction. He explained the situation to the sailors suggesting that they would have to throw him overboard to survive, but the sailors initially refused. However, as the storm intensified they reluctantly followed Jonah's instructions and once he was in the water the storm ceased immediately. Good news for the crew and other passengers – but, tough for Jonah! Who knows what stories the crew would have told the people of Tarshish when they reached their destination?

Meanwhile, the story continues, God sent a large fish to swallow Jonah. Please note that the text talks about a fish, and not a whale, for this detail often gets misrepresented in religious art. That said, the suggestion that someone could literally survive in the belly of a whale, or a fish, for three days is absurd because it is physically impossible! According to the story, inside the belly of the fish Jonah acknowledged that he had done the wrong thing and he prayed for deliverance. And in response God caused the fish to vomit Jonah out onto dry land!

Again, God called Jonah, the reluctant prophet, to go to Nineveh, and this time – not surprisingly - he went! But, Jonah did not go with enthusiasm, and he was neither articulate, nor strategic. He did not explain to the people of Nineveh that they needed to repent, and he did not seek a special meeting with the King to explain things. He simply said in a public place – ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ Part of me thinks: Surely Jonah, you could have done better than that!

Yet the people of Nineveh responded to that simple, God given, prophetic message from the man who reeked of fish. Jonah’s message was repeated to the King of Nineveh... and he recognised it for what it was. He got off his throne and, surprisingly, called the entire population of the city to repent by putting on sackcloth and ashes. And... because of this change of heart, God spared the city from destruction.

I encourage you to read the four short chapters of Jonah at some stage this week because when we read the whole story we’ll find that Jonah was not happy that God had spared that city of unbelievers, and only grudgingly conceded that the forgiveness and generosity of God was more than he could understand! When God blesses people that we don’t think are deserving I wonder if sometimes we think similarly to Jonah?

For the gardeners among us there is a lovely account of God teaching Jonah through the growth and destruction of a bush! For it was hot and God caused a bush to grow up to give Jonah shade, and Jonah loved that bush. Then God caused a worm to eat the roots of the bush so that the bush died and Jonah was cranky because he loved the bush. How much more, God said to Jonah, do I love the one hundred and twenty thousand people of Nineveh... than you love that bush?

Jonah was a long way from perfect, and yet God called him to make a significant difference in the lives of others, and grudgingly he did so. We are similarly a long way from perfect, and yet God calls us also, and has work for each of us to do which will make a difference for good. What is the work that God has called you to in the gift of this new year?

There is an important insight for us when we remember that even after Jonah ran away, and repeatedly expressed an ordinary attitude to things, God never gave up on him. Instead God repeatedly called him to get on with the work he’d been given to do. In the same way that God didn’t give up on Jonah, God never gives up on us. No matter how petty, how foolish, or selfish we are – God never gives up on us.

Wherever we are on our journey, and whatever our circumstance this week; whether we are running away, or feel deeply in tune with God; may we each be ready to listen and respond to the promptings of God’s Spirit and be a blessing in the lives of others.

We pray in the name of Christ, Amen.