

Brackenhurst Methodist Church: 25 January 2008
God, Jonah and a Message

Welcome & Notices

Scripture:

Jonah 3:1-10

INTRO

- The story of Jonah, probably the bit we know the best is the part about Jonah running away from God and being swallowed by a fish
- And I'm sure you've all heard the story about Little Johnny was talking to his teacher about whales eating people.
 - The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large mammal its throat was very small. Johnny insisted that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible.
 - * Johnny proceeded, "When I get to heaven, I will ask Jonah".
 - The teacher asked, "What if Jonah went to hell?"
 - * Johnny replied, "Well then you can ask him".
- Of course the story comes about because of a discussion as to whether the story in the Bible is true or not, and so we get caught up in the possibilities or impossibilities of people being swallowed by fish or whales, how they can survive in a fish's stomach and so on.
- Some of you will know that I don't believe that this story is true, that it is meant to be taken literally.
 - Rather, I believe that it is a parable.
- And you will know that when Jesus taught the crowds he used parables to make a point
 - It was a common form of teaching in the Jewish culture.
 - And so I believe that the story of Jonah and the whale was a Jewish parable that was told to make a point, and to teach something specific about God
 - * Just as Jesus used parables when he was on earth.
- Now, we've only read a very small part of the story tonight, but we need to realise that this section is only part of a far longer story
 - A story that has a beginning and an end as well, as as we look at our reading tonight I'm going to refer back to other parts of it
 - Maybe what you would like to do is go home and read the whole of Jonah

- It's only a couple of pages, and then you'll be able to say that you've read one whole book of the Bible
 - * If you haven't done that before
- So to begin this evening what I would like to do is to give some background on the story and when it was written.
 - You'll remember a couple of weeks ago I spoke about the history of Israel:
- One consolidated nation under the kings Saul and David, but divided into two under Solomon
 - the Northern Kingdom of Israel which was destroyed by Assyria in about 722BC
 - And the southern Kingdom of Judah, capital Jerusalem, which was invaded by Babylon in about 586BC, from which people were taken into exile
 - * Some 70 years later they were given a degree of freedom by the Persians who had overthrown the Babylonians and sent back home to rebuild.
- While in Exile in Babylon the Jewish people had examined their faith, and in a sense desired to purify it
 - So when they went back home and started to rebuild the temple and the city they began to rebuild their morals as well
 - * Unfortunately they missed the point a bit
 - Instead of rebuilding their morals around the desire of God to be a blessing to the nations around them
 - * They began to rebuild their country in a way that was exclusive and nationalistic (see Ezra and Nehemiah).
- What nationalist means is that they were saying the only person who has any right before God, the only people God loves are the Jews.
 - God hates the outsider so you have to banish the outsider, the foreigner, from your midst.
 - * Very much like the policies of the National Party in South Africa during the years of apartheid.
 - With the result that families were split apart.
 - * If you were married to a foreign woman you had to get divorced and send her and children away, and so on (Ezra 10:3).
- Now it is during this time, scholars tell us, that a whole lot of parables were told as a way of prophesying, a way of speaking God's word to correct a situation that was not according to his will
 - And so, for example we find the story of Ruth which emphasises the goodness of a foreigner
 - * And the story of Jonah which is remarkable for this reason:

- The very people that Jonah is sent to are the enemies of the Jews!
 - Ninevah was the capital city of Assyria — the nation that had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel 300 years or so before
 - * These were the people who should have been excluded, who were unclean, whose salvation would have caused the tearing of robes and sprinkling of ashes of Ezra and Nehemiah
- And God says go with a message of salvation to your arch enemies and tell them that they are also a part of God's kingdom.
 - I don't know how you would feel if God told you to do that
 - * If God told you to go to the person that you hate the most and tell them that God loves them.
 - You can image how Jonah felt, and why he ran away, and later on why he resented that God has saved them
- Anyway, this evening I would like to look at this story from a couple of different perspectives
 - From God's perspective
 - From a Human perspective
 - And then from the perspective of the message
- And maybe we can hear what God is still saying to us today through this story.

(1) God

- When God called the nation Israel to be his people, when he covenanted with them on Mount Sinai, and before that with Abraham
 - A key part of his call to them was to be a blessing to other nations
- He said to them that they would be for him a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation
 - A nation set aside for his purposes
- Now mostly the people understood that to mean that they were better than anybody else and shouldn't mix with the surrounding nations
 - But you would know that the job of a priest is rather be a conduit, a connection between the people and God
- In the Old Testament, in order to worship, people would go before the priest, and the priest would take the prayers to God, and the priest would answer them on God's behalf
 - In the New Testament, of course, Jesus is our high priest who gives us the confidence to come ourselves before the throne of God
 - * But the concept is there of priest as mediator between humanity and God
 - taking prayers, and offering consolation, healing and absolution to the people

- That was the role that Israel had been given by God
 - To be a mediator between God and the surrounding nations
 - * Not to proclaim death and destruction, but to invite them into God's kingdom way of living
- As I said, Israel chose instead to become exclusive and nationalistic and so that's why, by the time of Jesus, they were scandalised when Jesus mixed with the outcasts, with the outsiders.
- And so this story, whoever wrote it, reminds us of the first call that God placed on the people that he called his own
 - A call not to destroy the surrounding nations
 - * But a call to be as a priest to them, to bring to them the words of salvation
- This is what God had in mind, and this is the God we discover in this story, as the story begins with the call that God gives to Jonah:
 - Go and preach against the wickedness of Ninevah
 - * Of course this is the call that Jonah runs away from
- Then after Jonah's experience with the fish God calls him again:
 - Go to Ninevah and proclaim my message
 - * And once Jonah has been obedient we discover the purpose behind this story because we read in verse 10 that God had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened
- And Jonah speaks to God and describes him in this way:
 - “... you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”
- And as Jonah and God converse regarding who he is — and we'll look at Jonah's side of the story in a moment — God finishes up by saying Ninevah has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people. Should he not be concerned about that great city?
 - And in those closing verses of the story of Jonah God is revealed for who he is and who he has been since the beginning of creation
- A God who has each and every person, each lovingly created in his image, each and every person in the palm of his hand
 - And he desires that not one should perish and that each one should know the incredible depths of his love and forgiveness
- That is who God is
 - Even the enemy is loved
- And you would know that Jesus affirms this in his sermon on the Mount when he tells, commands, his followers to love their enemies (Mt 5:43ff)

- And I wonder sometimes if this isn't at the heart of what Jesus means when he speaks to his followers of the sign of Jonah (Mt 16:4; Lk 11:29ff).

(2) **Jonah**

- But Jonah has a different perspective
 - He's not all that excited about the fact that God chose to save the Ninevites
 - * After all, they were the enemy
 - Surely it was God's job to smite them?
- The author of this story so beautifully encapsulates the human attitude in this character, doesn't he?
 - Jonah represents so clearly the nationalistic attitude of the Israelites at that time
 - * the idea they are right and everybody else is wrong
 - * the idea that God loves only them, and the outsiders are sinner who must perish
 - * The idea that Israel is to be a pure race, untainted by the immorality of their neighbours.
 - And especially the idea that God should be destroying their enemies the Ninevites
 - * The capital of Assyria, the nation that had destroyed Israel those hundreds of years ago.
- And so the author, in a brilliant move, hooks the reader into the story by starting out painting God in a way that the Israelite would like to see him
 - A god who wants someone to preach against the Ninevites because of their wickedness
 - * A god who is quick to judge and condemn
- Eventually, as we know, Jonah went and, reluctantly, proclaimed the message, which changes, by the way, through the story.
 - And we discover that the Ninevites, while they may be wicked, also have repentant hearts
 - * They are willing to turn from their wickedness and turn towards God
- Jonah doesn't like this because it means that he has to stop seeing the Ninevites as the enemy
 - In fact, he gets grumpy and fights with God about it
 - "This is why I didn't want to go in the first place... I knew you do this, this is so typical of you. Instead of destroying them, you've now gone and forgiven them."

- * He says, in effect, that he would rather die than be reconciled to his enemy.
- Now this is what the prophet who wrote this story, this parable, is saying to the reader or the hearer
 - Saying in effect to the nationalistic Jews of the day who were once again building an exclusive kingdom in which everybody else was considered inferior.
 - * Can you relate to Jonah?
- And they could — they begin by agreeing with that God should judge Ninevah
 - But then as they begin to see how he responds that have to consider their own behaviour
 - * Behaviour which really, come to think about it is very childish
- Jonah exposes them for who they are
 - Childish people who are not really interested in what God wants, but only in what they want
- As soon as God begins to act in the way they like to describe him they cry out that it's not fair.
 - I wonder if we are the same?
- And I wonder if Jonah doesn't really represent, not just the Israelite, but all of us?
 - Go home, read the story, think about it.

(3) The Message

- Then, finally, the message
- As I mentioned earlier we are hooked into the story by a message of condemnation for those who are enemies
 - a message of condemnation that we can buy into.
 - * Who doesn't want to see their enemy destroyed?
- But as we follow the story what started out as condemnation becomes a message of love and acceptance of the enemy which frustrates Jonah
 - A message of hope which brings new direction and new life to the Ninevites
- It is a message that takes the reader on a journey from the way in which he thinks to the way in which God thinks
 - The story is about being challenged into God's way of thinking
- A story that takes the reader or hearer from a place where the outsider is an enemy, where the enemy is an outsider
 - From a place where what is different must be destroyed
 - From a place where destruction is what is due to the immoral and wicked
- And to a place where we realise that God is concerned about everybody

- To a place where we are instructed to learn about God's grace
- To a place where our enemies are to become our friends
- To a place where we embrace forgiveness and welcome the stranger and outsider
- To a place where we realise that God is really bigger than our own small mindedness
- and that for God's will to be done instead of ours
 - We have to step beyond our fears, step beyond our prejudices, step beyond our small mindedness
 - * And become people of grace
- People who are willing to love wastefully, and extravagantly and shower the world with signs of God's extravagant love.
- We begin by agreeing with the message which hooks us, and before we know it our thoughts and attitudes have, if not been transformed, at least challenged.
 - And so the story really isn't about God and his love for the ninevites
 - * But it is about us

CONCLUSION

- Let me close off
- Where is the place the words of this story resonate with your experiences of God and life?
 - Who are those you would condemn, those that you would see as enemies?
 - Who are those that you would struggle the most to go to
 - * For whatever reason
 - Maybe they've hurt you, maybe they don't like you
 - Maybe you just think that they're unworthy of your attention
 - * Or maybe even God's
- Where are the places where you try to avoid God's love for the other
 - the different, the outcast, even the enemy
- And how does this story challenge you into God's way of thinking?
 - Would you be like Jonah, sitting under a tree fighting with God because of the good he does?
 - Or does the story find you rejoicing with the Ninevites, having been spared God's destruction?
 - * Where does this story find you?
- And where does it take you?
 - How does this story move you and motivate you to become more Christlike?

- I pray that as we all reflect on the implications of this word of prophecy in our lives
 - That we would indeed begin a new journey of discovering God's love for all people.
- And that we would be called out of our fear, and into a different way of life that is more loving and accepting of the enemy
 - May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen