

Epiphany 3
25/1/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Jonah 3:1 – 5, 10
Psalm 66
I Corinthians 7:29 – 31
Mark 1:14 - 20

Something greater is here

*“It ain’t necessarily so...
the things you’re liable to read in the Bible,
it ain’t necessarily so...”*

*Jonah he lived in de whale...
For he made his home in dat fish’s abdomen...”*

George and Ira Gerswhin’s song questioned the truth about Jonah, and a whole range of other biblical stories, but the refrain does have a grain of truth in it. *It ain’t necessarily so* that Jonah is only about a prophet who survived being swallowed by a great fish. If we concentrate on that, we *ain’t necessarily* going to get to the real point of the story.

The book of Jonah is a satirical tract in which the prophet is a figure for Israel, and Ninevah is a figure representing the nations of the world, in particular, Assyria, long term enemy of Israel. The author of Jonah shared the view that God’s concern for the world was not confined to Israel but reached out to embrace the nations, and the whole of creation, a view found in the middle chapters of Isaiah. At a time when the leadership was seen as pursuing policies of racial exclusiveness, narrow nationalism and religious intolerance, Jonah and the book of Ruth were written to challenge that outlook and break open the fencing off of the faith. Israel is effectively castigated for keeping its religious heritage for itself and its reluctance to make God’s grace known amongst the gentiles.

The first part of Jonah deals with the prophet’s unsuccessful attempt to escape God’s call to preach to the nations, whom the prophet seems to have thought were undeserving of God’s care. But God did not cease to care for Ninevah, or Jonah, who was rescued so that he could have another go at fulfilling his task. The second part of the book deals with that, and as we saw, Ninevah hastened to repent and God was gracious to the people.

The New Testament uses Jonah in two ways. Matthew (12:29-31) takes Jonah’s three-day sojourn in the belly of the fish as a type of Christ’s resurrection. In Luke (11:29-30) Jesus compares Jonah’s ministry with his own but claims that *something greater than Jonah* is present in him.

Jonah appears in our readings today because of Mark's announcement of the Good News: *the time is fulfilled, the reign of God had come near*. In his Gospel Mark repeatedly shows us that what the prophetic faith hoped for took place in and through the life of Jesus, a person who was gifted with the authority of God. But Jesus was more than just a prophet: there was something greater present in him. Mark writes to show us that the "something more" was at work, not only in the cross and resurrection, but from the moment John was arrested and Jesus began to preach.

The time is fulfilled, the reign of God has come near... In these words Mark is witnessing to a turn of events so deep and far reaching that it became socially disruptive. Those who encountered Jesus and understand his message were never the same again. So it was for the first disciples of whom we heard today, and for countless others who have lived between then and now.

Jonah and Mark both show a word delivered that brought change. It is noticeable Jonah only speaks a few words in Ninevah, and they are words of judgement: "*forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown!*" This may be a message to inspire fear rather than hope. But the people are ready to hear God has a word for them, and responded by turning their lives around. It affects everyone and everything: even the animals! This is part of the humor that goes with this story. Jonah's efforts meant that the power of God's reconciling love entered into a new context and raised up a nation of repentant, worshipping foreigners. Jonah did not rejoice over this outcome. He was not glad God was active in the world and was miserable over the success of the mission. If Jonah is a figure for Israel, the nation, exclusivist and intolerant at the time, must have smarted over this story. But it is a witness to faith, and the ways of God, that such a book is found amongst the scriptures of the Hebrew canon.

There is nothing fishy about Mark's work. His is not a satirical novella. He speaks forthrightly of God's power and presence at work in the world, ready to make all things new. This is an event that makes claims upon the lives of people. None of the misery of Jonah is found here. Like the Ninevites, the first disciples respond immediately to the summons to acknowledge the rule of God, without regret over what they were leaving. It is as though they were lifted up and carried away by a power that was capable of breaking through, causing them to re-order their lives. One writer has said the call to discipleship is a bit like prayer. It introduces a set of choices that have consequences, but we can only make ourselves open to the call, rather than direct the action. That may be scary, but if we trust the good news, which tells us the call comes from a resource that moves according to life and hope, then we can let ourselves live with the new possibilities, and allow this to be the foundation for re-ordering our vocation, our social relations, and the way we want to see public power exercised.

The time is fulfilled, the reign of God has come near... This is Mark's message for us today. On this Australia Day weekend, the week of the Inauguration of the 44th President, and the apparent withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, these texts show us that God's grace not only reaches beyond all the limits we set up to make life safe for ourselves, it breaks in to create changes, and we are called to follow Jesus. That means we are invited to "walk in his way" and conform with his particular pattern that is life giving because it is based on God's gracious, creative, reconciling love. Being able to see that affects the way we look on our neighbours within this country, and the way we look at conflicts in countries outside our borders. It also suggests what we might hope for from our leaders as they endeavour to lead us through the wreckage created in the past few years.

Although Mark wrote between the events of Jesus' life and his expected early return, the weight of his message to us is not weakened by 2000 years of history. As Paul would have us see, it is just as urgent now as then, and the impact of this knowledge calls us to make choices. Will they be based on hope or fear? Will they be choices for life, or for death? On Australia Day *the time has come* once more: the gracious call of God is amongst us, and we are blessed by this. And we are blessed because there is still time to choose the path we take for our life.