

Epiphany 4
2/2/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Jonah 3:1-10
Psalm 15
Matthew 5:1-12

Jonah and the miracle of Nineveh

In a sentence

God's grace is realised in us as we become a means of grace for others

I remarked in passing last week that the book of Jonah is more effective as biblical proclamation if, in fact, the story of the big fish were not 'literally' true. That is, the message of Jonah is stronger if the story is 'just' a story.

Today we'll begin by considering a little more closely how that might be the case.

When reading Jonah, of course, we cannot but notice the fish. It is the most attention-grabbing element of the story, not least because it seems to be the most problematic for certain understandings of the text. It is the fish which precipitates questions about 'did it really happen?', and which becomes a test of belief about the text and about what God can and can't do.

And yet in the passage we have heard today there is an even greater miracle: 'And the people of Nineveh believed God.' This is not miraculous in the terms we usually associate with miracles, but the Scriptures cannot be held accountable for our not knowing when something miraculous is in our midst. In fact, most of the time, *not noticing* the miracle is the very sin of God's people.

Of course, we might hold that anyone could be converted under the right circumstances and that this is scarcely miraculous. Yet we don't normally behave as if this were the case. What are the chances that the wall will come down in Israel, or that the architects of Brexit could ever find the courage to sorry should it all go belly-up? What are the chances our governments – or, more to the point, the self-interested voting public – will have a change of heart on asylum seekers? These are 'conversions' for which we might hope but it is really *only* hope – in the weak and strong sense – we hold for them. It would simply be miraculous if such things were to come about.

So it was also for the Israelites represented by Jonah. To read the book of the prophet Nahum is to feel the vitriol Israel held for Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. This brutal people destroyed forever the ten tribes of northern kingdom of Israel, leaving only Judah and Benjamin in the south. Full as they were of their own power and achievement, and that of their gods, it is simply ludicrous that Nineveh would have a change of heart at the mere word of a quivering prophet from one its victim-states. It would be easier to believe, say, that a chap was thrown from a boat, swallowed by a fish and then burped up on the shore three days later.

It might be argued, of course, that the repentance of Nineveh also never happened. Most likely it didn't. In this sense, the book is no more historically true here than in relation to the fish.

This doesn't matter, however, because the book presents not so much what *happened* to Jonah and Nineveh (as if *something else* might have happened) but, more deeply, it tells what *can* happen when the word of God is spoken.

What 'can' happen are those things we noted when considering the fish last week: the chosen one is preserved, outsiders become insiders, God's creative word does not return empty. This all happens again in Nineveh: Jonah survives three fearful days in the belly of the enemy, Gentile Nineveh is converted and God's word finds its mark in both Jonah and Nineveh.

Such miracles are difficult to believe but not in the way in which the great fish story or the resurrection of Jesus are difficult to believe. On their own, those attention-grabbing flashes are quickly absorbed again by the dark. Yet, in the Scriptures, they are not things in themselves which happened to happen but rather serve to illuminate deeper realities which can be very uncomfortable. Of such deeper realities it is not so much that we *can't* believe them as that we don't *want* to.

As we will see in more detail next week (chapter 4), just such a reality is revealed by the conversion of Nineveh and the extraordinary conclusion to the chapter, 'and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them' (KJV, a more literal translation of the Hebrew here).

The book of Jonah places us in a relationship to each other which will sit no more comfortably with us than it did with Jonah. It is part of the affliction of self-righteousness that we imagine that we stand between God and those we do not like. They, then, must join us – must become like us – to get closer to God. In a negative way, this is the basis of Jonah's response to the initial call: if I don't go, the Ninevites won't have the opportunity to repent; they can't get God but through me.

We noted last week that there is some truth to that: Jonah is crucial to the mission. Yet, Jonah's position 'between' God and Nineveh is not as obstruction or filter but as conduit, and as conduit to all which is distant from God, even finally Jonah himself. Twice in the story Jonah is just such a means for others, despite himself. Who Jonah is, before God, makes Jonah important for others' standing before God, whether he likes it or not. There is more work involved with grace than we usually imagine.

Since the Reformation we have grown familiar with the notion that it is by grace that we are saved, through faith. We see something of this in the conversion of Nineveh and God's 'repentance'. But perhaps what has been weakest about our repetition of the Reformation slogan is that it has caused us to distinguish too sharply between the grace which saves and the works which are then hard to fit coherently into the schema.

This can lead us to say that we are saved 'for' good works – in order now to do what God requires – but Jonah's story presses us to something deeper. Jonah *becomes* what he *is* when he does what God commands. It is a 'given' that Jonah belongs to God – that he is chosen or 'saved'. Yet Jonah is also still *becoming* God's chosen, and becomes the chosen when he becomes God's own means for the salvation of others. In the call of God Jonah hears what he is in *eternity*; in his action Jonah becomes in *time* what he has been called: God's body in the world.

That ought to sound familiar. It is the being-becoming dynamic of Jesus' own baptism and temptation. It is the gift and call of all who gather around the Lord's Table: receive what you are, become what you receive.

To be saved by faith is not, then, to be insulated from the world of works, from responsibility. It is not to be in any way isolated from those others whom God would also save. We believe that God makes us whole *by faith* only when we *act*. Specifically, such faith is only held in acting to make others whole. Our action is the sacrament of God's grace toward us, and the grace is not there without the sacrament.

For Jonah and Israel; for the church; for Nineveh, Babylon and Rome; for America, China, Russia and Australia; for each person sitting here today or in a café down the street: salvation is becoming in time what we are in eternity – part of the whole and healing life of God.

The challenge in the book of Jonah is not whether such a miraculous thing can happen – is not whether God's word can turn the sinner's heart. The challenge is whether we *want* God to bless those who do not bless us, and are willing to be the means by which this comes about.

When such a willingness is found, truly we are in the presence of a miracle. In this Jesus is preeminent – the blessing for those who curse – of whom Jonah is a shadow.

Let us, then, say yes to God in such a way that the miracle of life-with-God-in each-other might be our very own.
