

Transfiguration
23/2/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Luke 11:29-32
Psalm 99
Matthew 17:1-9

Jonah, the sign of Jesus

In a sentence

The 'sign of Jonah' points to the same thing as does the Transfiguration: that God infuses the world with God's own presence; this is God's gift and call.

Over the last month we've been splashing around in Jonah, all without much direct reference to Jesus.

One of the obvious ways in which Jesus might seem to be connected to Jonah is the 'three days and nights' which Jonah is said to have spent inside the great fish, which beg to be compared to the 'three days' by which the New Testament counts the time between the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, at least according to St Matthew, Jesus himself seems to make this link (Matthew 12.40):

For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

As obvious as that connection is, we must also say that it is not very *interesting*, as it makes the link only in the coincidence of the number days and nights (despite problems with Easter's 'three' days and nights) and, perhaps, in that the both the fish and the tomb are things 'cavernous'.

If not very interesting, it's also *odd* that Jesus seems to link the fish with his death and resurrection. His reference to the 'sign of Jonah' comes in response to a demand for a miracle to prove his authority. Having just denied the request for such a miracle, he then seems to promise an extraordinary miracle – that he will be raised from the dead. This self-contradiction – if that is what it is – is strange indeed. The only thing which would make it not odd is if what Jesus means is that his three days in the heart of the earth, and his resurrection, will be a *hidden* thing – just as Jonah's time in the fish was something no one else witnessed.

Such hiddenness as the link between Jesus and Jonah is much more interesting than a simple correspondence between the days in the fish and the days in the tomb, for if Jesus' time 'in the heart of the earth' – and his coming out of that time – are hidden, then he says that the miracle his opponents can expect will not *look like* a miracle. The miracle you get you will not recognise. We noted a couple of weeks ago that the sin of the people of God is often that we do not recognise a miracle when it happens.

This un-spectacular nature of the 'sign of Jonah' is reflected in Luke's version of what Jesus says about Jonah, as we have heard today. In Luke the 'sign of Jonah' is *not* the three days in the fish or the tomb but rather the seemingly more mundane and even very troubling conversion of Nineveh. Nineveh heard what Jesus' opponents do not: the word of the great God in the words of little Jonah.

Jesus effectively says to his opponents, of himself: ‘Can you not see what you are looking at? All miracles are a distraction; the word of God comes to you in this very ordinary exchange, here and now. Believe, as did Nineveh.’

We have seen this right through the story of petulant little Jonah, the necessary vessel by which God would claim – and does claim – the Gentiles.

And we see it also in the seemingly quite contradictory story of the Transfiguration. It seems to contradict the ordinariness of day-to-day Jesus because it looks as if the veil is pulled back for a moment for us to see the ‘real’ Son of God, shining bright with divine glory, under the *veneer* of flesh and blood. We might hear this reading of the Transfiguration confirmed in the booming voice from heaven, ‘This is my *Son*, the *Beloved*; with him I am well pleased...’

But...perhaps the voice did not ‘boom’ – the text doesn’t say. Perhaps the voice *whispered* those words: ‘*This* is my Son, the Beloved...’, with a shift of emphasis reflecting the different tone. Perhaps the disciples fell to the ground not for fear of the *voice* of God, overwhelming in its thunderous majesty, but for fear of what it *said*: ‘Here is the sign of Jonah, and yet greater than Jonah; here is Word-in-Flesh. I, God, ‘look like’ this.’

The sign of Jonah points towards the God who *has being* by joining to the flesh of the world, who is ‘incarnate’. Suddenly Jonah is a Christmas story, and the fish a manger. Jonah himself was not ‘accidental’ flesh; God persisted with stubborn Jonah not for Jonah’s sake but for God’s own sake – Jonah is integral to God’s work being done.

That God might *need* the world in this way – that God ‘looks like this’, like flesh-and-blood Jesus – is harder to believe than any miracle of the magic-trick variety. To put it in the starkest terms of the New Testament, the sign of Jonah and the Transfiguration – the incarnation of God – reveals Jesus’ descent to the Deep of the cross to be the glory of God. (This is a theme of John’s gospel, for which the being ‘lifted up’ to the cross is both crucifixion and enthronement).

Matthew’s saying that the Son of Man will spend three days and nights in the ‘heart of the earth’ (Matthew 12.40) then comes to be less about time in the tomb and more about God in our very midst: *we* and our world are the ‘heart of the earth’ within which Jesus spends ‘three days and nights’. Risen *and* dying *and* preaching and teaching, Jesus is God’s presence in the heart of us.

This is the content of our hope: that, in the belly of Nineveh, in the midst of death, in our lives just as they are, God might be found. And God is not merely *found* in this ‘heart of the earth’ but it realised as God’s own *home*. The Peters of the world need make no ‘dwelling’ for God in holy places (Matthew 17.4); God is doing that Godself in all places.

That is the thing for which we *hope*, and it is the thing to which we are *called*: to become what we are, God’s true dwelling place, to hear the word directed to those disciples on the mountain, and to us – listen! – and to respond with joy.

Let us, then, become what we have been created to be – the very dwelling place of God, Christ’s own body, that we and those whose lives we touch might know the rich humanity God intends us to be.

A Prayer of Confession in response to the sermon

We bless you, O God, for out of desire to love and enjoy us you have created and sustained us and all things.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed, we have fallen short of the glory for which we were made.

Forgive us when we postpone obeying your call to life as we await some satisfying proof that how we already are is not better.

Forgive us when the next thing you ask of us is not spectacular enough for our sense of our own importance.

Forgive us, then, those things large and small which go undone: the time not spared for one who needs it, the gift we do not give, the anger which we could have checked, the effort we could have made.

O God, who before the passion of your only begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear *our* cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory.

Just so, gracious God, have mercy on us...