

A Change of Mind

24 January 2021

Faith in God is complicated. Being a person of faith, living as a Christian, is hard. Who among us has not lain in bed at night with the weight of the world on our shoulders, maybe after a bereavement or an illness, or just a bad day, and thought - Why? Who among us has not looked into a world of pain where bad things happen to good people and thought – how?

Faith in God necessarily comes with challenges, ambiguities. Because God is God; unrestrained by human thought or will, existing on a plane beyond our comprehension. We can know God, but we cannot fully understand God. And it is in this, frequently confused, wanting, searching state that we approach God's holy Word, maybe looking for easy answers, quick fixes, solutions that fit with our expectations and desires.

And what do we find?

Well, oftentimes, more ambiguity, answers to questions we don't think we asked, solutions to problems that don't fit with our wants... We find God, not our version of God, but God. And if we are willing to see or accept it, we find God calling us to a new, different, and better life – not an easy life by any measure – but a better one for us, and for all people. We find a call to change our hearts and our minds.

The book of Jonah, from which our first reading comes today, is a parable, a story, maybe even a warning, that offers us an image of God. This is not a story that should be taken literally, rather it is a way of looking not only at God, but ourselves too.¹ Many of us will remember Jonah only for the fantastical image of him being in the belly of a fish or a whale. It would be a mistake, though, to focus too much on the imagery of the parable, or trying to figure out if it is true, for if we do, we may miss the message that lies beneath. It is a tale that paints a picture of a troubled world, a complicated political and social landscape. It is not a parallel to our own situation, but we can certainly learn something from it.

We enter the story as God has called Jonah for the second time, telling him to go to Nineveh. Jonah has already refused and has even opted to jump into the sea, rather than follow God's call. But God persists, and on the second call Jonah goes to this huge city, in the Assyrian Empire. Now this already stands in stark contrast to the image we often have of God calling prophets, or even disciples like Simon and Andrew in today's Gospel reading, and them getting up and going immediately.

¹ Phyllis Tribble, "Jonah", in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume V*, pp.637-641.

But I think the story of Jonah, though certainly fantastical, is probably a little closer to our own relationship with God. How quick are we to get up and do God's bidding whatever the cost or consequence? God's call is never comfortable or uncomplicated.

Of course, there are other reasons why Jonah doesn't want to go: from his perspective he is being sent to the seat of evil, to a place of murders, thieves and criminals. To the capital city of the empire that destroyed his homeland, his sworn enemies. But eventually he goes. Not, though, because he wants to... and when he does, he gives probably the shortest prophesy in the bible "Yet forty days, and Nin'evah shall be overthrown!"

And what happens? He is technically successful, the whole city changes. Probably to his disappointment. The people repent, they know God in their own way and they go into a period of almost comical repentance and fasting, everyone from the top to the bottom of society put on sackcloth and show their repentance in the face of the wrongs they have done. From extreme violence, to equally extreme repentance. With this, the destruction that God had sought to bring to them was no more; and they were forgiven.

In the verses following our reading, Jonah is livid. The story tells us that he expected this all along, but he is enraged that God could forgive the greatest foes of God's own people - the Israelites. God's will, God's mind, from our perspective changes, and does not fit with the desires of Jonah. And if we are honest in the same situation, we would most likely be on Jonah's side. Earlier this week I saw this story being compared, by someone writing in 2009, as if God told an American to go to the camp of Osama Bin Laden, the now dead leader of Al-Qaeda, who planned the attacks on the world trade centre on September 11th 2001, with a message of love and forgiveness.² No matter how much we talk about forgiveness and love, it is still hard and most of us would have trouble in this situation.

But this parable shows us that we can barely begin to imagine the insatiable love that God has for all. Just because Jonah hated these people, and the story tells us they had done horrific things, there is still a path back to God.

There is still room in God's love for them, no matter what those who are already in God's love think. For God is not confined by the lives of humans, God is not restricted by our opinions or desires, God may delight in creation, but it does not limit God. This is a story of the mercy of God, of God's

² Beth L. Tanner, "Commentary On Jonah 3:1-5, 10", *Working Preacher From Luther Seminary*, 2009
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-jonah-31-5-10-2>.

willingness to change from a path of destruction, out of love for all people. and if we let it, it can speak to us today.

This past Wednesday Joe Biden was inaugurated as the 46th President of the United States. He gave speech calling for peace, for unity, for a change in the mindset of the people he now leads. He gave this speech, not staring out at hundreds of thousands of cheering constituents, instead the US capital was virtually empty save the tens of thousands of military personnel – necessary to secure the safety of the new president, and in no small part due to the refusal of some to see the humanity in others, an inability to have a change of mind.

It is easy to sit in wonder at the problems faced across the Atlantic, to content ourselves that such civic strife is a far cry from our own social and political disagreements. But in truth, we too face growing inequality, growing disinformation, growing division, growing hate.

As we retreat into our own bubbles of information, of likes and dislikes, ignoring opposing opinions, seeking agreement and conformity rather than debate and conversation, we too face a society, a world that will become ever more fractured.

In short, *we* need a change of mind too. One that recognises and celebrates difference, that encourages peaceful disagreement and debate, that seeks to do good for all people. In a world where there is increasing fear of the other, where refugees are demonised rather than embraced, where we become ever more sheltered from those who have different opinions or experiences from ourselves, where hatred and ignorance are easier than engagement and forgiveness, God calls us to change, to change our hearts and our minds.

How many of us, like Jonah, refuse to do things because of a grievance or pain? How many of us hold grudges? How many of us judge others by their clothes, or their accent, or their heritage? How many of us run *from* rather than *to* God's call?

It is not easy, it will not be easy, but we can change:

We can reach out to others,

We can pray for our enemies and adversaries,

We can listen to other points of view,

We can speak to the family member or friend we had a falling out with,

We can try to see the good in others.

It is often said that god's ways are not our ways, and while that is undoubtedly true, as Christians we have a calling, a duty, to *try* to follow God's word, to live up to the message of this parable and all the other things we know about God.

If God loves us so much that God's mind can be changed, surely, we have a responsibility to begin to do the same. We are called to love, even when we don't want to. In this world of division, we have a chance, as Christians, to begin to change, to spread God's love, and show others the same mercy that we have been shown.

We are called to put aside our prejudice, our political will, our assumed truths, and go into the world, with God's love and mercy as the gift we have received, and the greatest one that we can give.