

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Epiphany 3

(Australia Day Sunday)

24 January 2021

Readings: Jonah 3: 1-10; Psalm 62: 5-12;
 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20.

“The Making of a Prophet”

Run Away!

The Book of Jonah is a short, satirical, rattling good yarn - demonstrating humour, irony, and pathos. It is also probably one of the last books to be written and included in the Old Testament canon.

The book is not an historical narrative but is rather a morality tale (or possible a play) about obeying God's call and the demonstration of God's grace. Indeed, through history it has provided a suitable allegory for many people who have been called by God but tried to avoid its consequences by running away.

To recap the story. God called Jonah to go and prophesy to the city of Nineveh in the East, but in response he turned his tail and fled on a boat toward Tarshish in the West. A large storm hit the ship and Jonah was thrown overboard by the crew, subsequently being swallowed by a great fish. In the fish he prayed for deliverance and was spewed out onto dry land. Once again, God called him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance, which he finally did. The people of Nineveh repented and were saved from punishment, but Jonah then became angry because he had secretly hoped to see their destruction. Finally, God admonished Jonah for being self-centred and lacking in grace.

Like any good story, the strength of this one is its universal application. People still try to avoid God's call; people still run away from their responsibilities and blame others; and when people do obey, they can still hope that those they dislike will be crushed. The moral of this story, however, is about the power of God's grace that desires to forgive and restore rather than condemn and destroy.

As is the case with many ancient Hebrew stories, the story of Jonah is a revelation of human nature, which is contrasted with God's nature. Jonah is a religious archetype – one who does not really want to get involved at first but when he does, becomes a zealot and wants damnation meted out upon all those around of whom he disapproves.

Seeing Too Much

The early twentieth century poet, Thomas Stearns Eliot, wrote in *Choruses from the Rock*: “O Lord, deliver me from the man of excellent intention and impure heart”. Like Jonah, Eliot’s poem/play is also about the delivery of a prophecy; but rather than preaching to Nineveh in the East it is directed to London in the West. It is also a call to repentance and return to God.

Like many prophets, Eliot saw too much. His poem was written in 1934, when the dark clouds of European war were once more rising on the horizon and the world headed for war. But unlike Nineveh, no one listened, no one responded, no one repented. Hitler and his Nazis were not taken seriously enough by many in Eliot’s world. The failure to heed, the failure to discern and act, the failure to see beyond the populism of national socialism to its destructive and evil heart inflicted devastation. If only people had listened!

Prophecy is not about predicting the future, but it is about revealing consequences. Eliot, like many others at the time, was a prophet who revealed the consequences for a world that had turned its back on God, indeed a world that had turned away from the desire for peace, justice, and the common good. Instead, it had turned toward self-aggrandisement, personal gain, and the exercise of abuse and power over others. Recent events in the United States have given us yet another example of such consequences.

Eliot wrote:

*What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of GOD.* (*Choruses from the Rock, II*)

His words also speak to us today. Amid the uncertainties of the past year, we still need to hang on to those things that bind us together as a community – such as a desire for truth and justice; the importance of equity and opportunity; the freedom to live in peace and security; and faithfulness to God, each other, and the natural world that we inhabit. There are consequences if we fail to address any of these things.

Prophecy did not end with the coming of Christ but continued through history and remains with us today. Indeed, there are prophets in our own times who have spoken about consequences. There are famous ones such as Martin Luther King Jnr, Hans Kung and Nelson Mandela; but there are also lesser-known Australian ones such as John Harris, Tim Costello, and Patricia Brennan.

Consequences

So, what is God calling us to do today? As we contemplate what Australia Day might mean for us in the twenty-first century, we are aware of several conflicting narratives about what the British settlement at Sydney Cove meant and the consequences it had.

It is complex, and it is a temptation to be like Jonah and run from it. But we cannot avoid the conflict and the storm will catch us up. We will also find ourselves tossed overboard into the confusion and danger of the swirling waters of doubt, guilt, and fear. It is then natural to cry out for a saviour who will come along and make everything ‘great’ once again. But all saviours are not equal; indeed, as we have witnessed recently, some so-called ‘saviours’ do not save at all but rather lead their followers to destruction.

We need discernment in our common life. As the Psalmist wrote:

*Nevertheless, my soul, wait in silence for God:
for from him comes my hope.* (Psalm 62: 5)

Our Australian narrative has consequences. The original people of the land have a history going back tens of thousands of years. The dispossession of the Aboriginal people by Europeans did not include any recognition of their prior claims to the land, nor did it recognise their laws and their customs, nor did it confer upon them any rights. In short, the Aboriginal people were conquered but there was no subsequent treaty with them. Nevertheless, some things have changed, especially following the 1967 referendum and the Mabo decision in 1992, and now we have before us the Uluru Statement from the Heart to contemplate.

There are many other aspects of the Australian narrative that are either ambiguous or shameful: the White Australia policy, the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, the treatment of the environment and the rise of climate change, and a widening social gap in economic, educational and health opportunities. Yet, there are also many stories of success that can be celebrated. As I said, it is complex and often ambiguous.

What we need is discernment in our common life. To be sure, we also need to understand that as a community we share a common life – everything is connected to everything else. The work of the prophet is to draw our attention to consequences and to challenge us to find a better way to live – lest we forget the lessons of the past on the one hand and fail to discern what is happening around us now on the other.

And so, the Psalmist wrote again:

*Put no trust in extortion, do not grow worthless by robbery:
If riches increase, set not your heart upon them.* (Psalm 62: 10)

Jesus the Prophet

The Gospel of Mark describes Jesus commencing his ministry by calling his followers and prophesying:

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;
repent, and believe in the good news.* (Mark 1: 15)

The Gospel of Mark begins with hope, but it ends in tragedy. Rather than repenting and believing the good news, the world turned on Jesus and destroyed him. At the end, forsaken by all around him and even God, he cried out and died. The holy of holies was then torn open and the pagan soldier proclaimed: “Surely this man was the Son of God!”. Finally, the women went to Jesus’ tomb and found it empty, and upon receiving a message from a young man that he had risen, they fled in terror.

Jesus’ prophecy of the Kingdom of God and the need to repent went beyond mere words into action – an action demonstrated through his own life. Jesus the Prophet became ‘the prophecy’ in himself and acted it out through how he lived and died.

The mystery here is that the Kingdom of God is to be seen in the beaten and bloody body of Jesus on the cross, not in the palaces of Pilate or Herod, nor in the Temple or the synagogue. This is confronting, not only because of the vicious and unjust torture and death of Jesus, but because the things that we think are important about humanity are stripped away and we are left with the question: ‘So, what is the good news when it ends at the cross?’ What sort of prophecy is this?

The Gospel of Mark leaves us to contemplate that question, but not without a few clues to help us in the process, such as: Jesus’ ministry of healing, Peter’s confession, Judas’ betrayal, Pilate’s question of truth, the Soldier’s proclamation at the cross, and the empty tomb. As it was in Nineveh, so it was in Jerusalem; and we are left to rely upon the grace of God.

For Australia, for the church, for international politics, for human welfare, for the righting of the wrongs committed against others, grace is the key. And by that, I mean the contentment to give up one’s own needs and power for the sake of others.

Moreover, grace is the key to discernment. When interpreting the words of those who would wish to lead us, we need to hear the grace, when setting policy for the ordering of society or for the use of resources we need to hear the grace, when confronting the world’s ills and seeking to bring justice and peace we need to hear the grace, when speaking for God or when proclaiming the Gospel, we need to hear the grace. For if we neither see nor hear grace in any of these things we are not encountering God.

Advance Australia? Only by the grace of God.