

Epiphany 3 – Wesley 9am – 25<sup>th</sup> January 2015

Theme: “Called, whether we like it or not!”  
‘Sub-title – the worst sermon ever!’

Readings: Jonah 3:1-10 & Mark 1:14-20

Text: Jonah proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’ Jonah 3:4b

### Introduction

I came across this wonderful story when doing some reading around the texts for today.

It goes like this:

“So I walk into a church in the inner city where they serve breakfast every morning of the week to people who are homeless or in need. It is quite a large affair with around 100 plus sharing most days. This takes a lot of organizing and there are people from all over who volunteer to help.

I was surprised to see some-one I knew one morning, helping as a volunteer in the kitchen. He was a well-known businessman and a member of one of our more affluent congregations in the area. I went over to speak to him, marvelling that such a man was here working away in the kitchen. I called to him and he looked up from stacking the dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

I said to him, “I think it is great that you are here giving of your time.” “Well I’m glad that you think it is great,” he mumbled as he continued with his dirty dishes.

Seeking to continue the conversation I said, “I am curious, have you always enjoyed ministry to the homeless?”

“Who said that I enjoyed this?” he replied. “Frankly, I mostly can’t stand the homeless people that I’ve met here.”

“Really?!” I said, somewhat dumbfounded by what I had just heard.

“Have you sat down and talked with our guests here? A lot are homeless for a reason and have all sorts of mental illnesses,” he continued to say.

“Well it makes it all the more remarkable that you are here, washing dishes for them,” I said.

It moved me to say to him, “Why are you here, if you can’t stand it?”

He looked up from the dishwasher and the dirty dishes and said to me in a tone of exasperation in his voice, “Because Jesus put me here; that is why!!” And then he continued with the dirty dishes.”

Having run something like that, but with lunch-time meals for nearly six years in Queanbeyan, I can understand his response.

Sometimes we don’t know what we are getting into when we accept to follow the call of the Lord. God, through Christ, calls us into amazing situations. Sometimes situations we would rather not be in but we are there in response to God’s call on our life. In today’s readings we have two ‘calling passages’ – the one of the reluctant Jonah and the other of the first disciples.

Let’s look at the reluctant Jonah, because from a ministry viewpoint I love the story of Jonah as it resonates with some of the reluctant areas of ministry that sometimes befall me!

## Jonah

The book of Jonah is a strange, even funny story. Some commentators have called the book of Jonah a kind of outlandish, extended joke. Out of the blue, Jonah is commanded by God to become a missionary to the worst, most hated people in the then known world, or at least as far as Israel was concerned: the Ninevites. Jonah's initial response is to run in the opposite direction. He would rather die than go and talk to the Ninevites about God. So God sends a huge fish to swallow Jonah up and then spit him out on the shore of the Ninevites. Evidently God was serious when he commanded Jonah to "Go! Preach to Nineveh!"

This Sunday's set reading from Jonah takes up where the Lord came and ordered Jonah a second time to "Get up, go to Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I tell you." Jonah 3:1

So Jonah reluctantly gives up and gives in to God. He goes to Nineveh with a lousy attitude and preaches the shortest and worst sermon in history – a one-sentence threat saying that in 40 days Nineveh 'will be history' – basically you are all going to die!!

"There God, I've preached to the disgusting Ninevites, done my job," and then he left in a huff, not expecting anything to happen.

Wonder of wonders, in response to the worst sermon by the most reluctant of preachers, the Ninevites repent. The whole city repents and God also repents of the threatened judgement. Israel had been called to be a 'light to the nations' but years of humiliating defeat at the hands of the Assyrians, remembering that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, what Jew in the world would want to be part of God's reaching out to the Ninevites? It was the Assyrians that destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722/21BC.

It appears that God is teaching not only Jonah, but Israel also, a lesson here. Just maybe God is also speaking to us through this account, this strange, funny story from so long ago.

Can anyone here relate to this ancient, funny story? That is to ask, has anyone here ever been sent to bring God's word and God's healing to someone you despised or really struggled with?

## Personal Story

Many years ago Annette and I passed through Canberra on a camping trip. The children were four and six so it was roughly 30 years ago. It was winter and we camped on the edge of the Queanbeyan River. Initially we had a huge frost and then a couple of days of drizzly rain. As we packed up our tent we said, "Who would ever want to come to minister in Queanbeyan?!"

Some ten or eleven years later, God called me to be the minister at Queanbeyan Uniting and I said "Yes". They were hard but good years of ministry there. You have to be careful what you say – God seems to hear and has a sense of humour, with a twist!

### Relating this to ourselves

Let's personalise this a little for our own reflection.

- When do we want to run away from God and what God is asking of us? Have we experienced that for ourselves? As a minister I have seen this with parishioners when asking for a task to be done. We are good on excuses why we can't do certain things. Becoming elders, helping with children's or youth ministry, being involved with stewardship or on a roster, looking out for new people and welcoming them. Sound familiar – 'Oh, I can't do that – it's just not me!' Remember Jonah – by the grace of God he did what he didn't want to do and God honoured his action, in spite of his personal deficiencies!
- What's the worst sermon that you've ever heard? (and you are not allowed to say today's!!) I am amazed by some of what I consider to be my pretty ordinary sermons that somehow touch the hearts of others. It is not my words but God's Holy Spirit that somehow has used my feeble words and touched the lives of others. There have been conversations that I've had that I don't remember, that have impacted amazingly on the lives of others. In these instances it hasn't been me, but God working through me. May be we need to consider how God uses us even in the ordinary things in life?
- Modern day Nineveh, is in fact the city of Mosul, a city of some million plus people, in northern Iraq, 400 kms north of Baghdad. It is the largest city controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In 2014 more than half a million people fled as IS fighters captured the city. It formally had a strong minority of Assyrian Christians and was the home of the University of Mosul, which was one of the largest educational and research centres in Iraq and the Middle East. It is said that the tomb of Jonah also is still to be found there. Suddenly we are thrust into the modern era and suddenly we are confronted with the atrocities of war, conflict within religions and the question of where and when do we stand up for our Christian faith, without looking like a fanatic, but being true to our calling. A sombre reflection as we look at a portion of the story of Jonah and where God may be calling us.

Let us pray.

Loving God,

Lift our eyes beyond the boundaries that we have erected around your kingdom.

Help us to see your constantly expanding realm that we may shake off the limitations that we impose upon ourselves and the areas of ministry that we limit ourselves to. Enable us to see our faith as an adventure and not be frightened by not being sure about whether or not we can do certain things.

Help us to trust in you and your ways and accept the challenge to 'step out in faith' in certain areas of our lives.

This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.