

I have 3 lovely grand daughters, 2 are now young ladies and one is a tiny dark haired ball of **fun, mischief, laughter and tears.**

Almost the first word from the little one was “No”, and her second word was “No”, also. All 3 grand daughters are definite in their likes and dislikes and are not reticent in expressing them.

While all 3 are curious and love a challenge, none have reached the stage where they are open to the ‘new’ and ‘different’. They are still very cautious, wrapped in their prejudices, childhood concepts and peer group opinions - a comfortable cocoon, but a social inertia.

I think this is typical of most of us to some extent.

Leaders, inventors, people who make a real impact on our world, are those who have learned to harness this inertia, or who have learned to think outside the box, going, to quote, ‘where no one has gone before’. *Most of us have to be cajoled or bullied into change.*

The disciples were no different to the rest of us –

It took Jesus 3 years of talking, walking and miracles plus a resurrection to open the disciples’ minds.

Jonah, also, was wrapped in prejudice and intransigence.

His is an interesting story- a **story** of God's grace and human fallibility.

All most of us know is that Jonah spent an improbable 3 days in the belly of a whale.

We heard a few verses read today, a part of the 4 little chapters that make up the book of Jonah, which is partly parable and partly, maybe, a true story.

Jonah was one of only four prophets that Jesus mentioned by name during His earthly ministry (Isaiah, Daniel, and Zechariah were the others). And Jesus actually identified Himself with Jonah’s three-day sojourn in the belly of the great fish, noting it as a foreshadowing of His own death, when Jesus would spend three days “in the heart of the earth, before his resurrection.”

Let us do a quick synopsis of the Jonah’s story: Jonah came from a town called Gath-hepher, near Nazareth in the area that later came to be known as Galilee. During Jonah’s years as a prophet, Israel was a politically strong nation, still basking in the glory following the reigns of the mighty warrior-king David and the splendour and wisdom of King Solomon.

Ninevah was the capital of a fast weakening non- Jewish Assyrian empire.

Jonah was sent by God to warn the people of Nineveh to mend their cruel and profligate ways or be destroyed.

Now Jonah rather liked the fact that the wrath of God should descend on this unpleasant gentile city.

He heard and understood God’s command, but rather than do God’s bidding and preach repentance to Ninevah, Jonah chose to flee in the opposite direction, aboard a ship.

As he sailed, a great storm arose, even though it was not the time of the year for storms. This furious storm threatened the ship and scared the hardy sailors.

Jonah realised that God was angry with him and begged the sailors to throw him overboard—at which point a great sea monster prepared by God rose up and swallowed Jonah. The storm abated.

After a period of three days in the belly of this sea monster, Jonah repented and in prayer agreed to obey God and go to Ninevah --- so the monster released Jonah. Jonah went to Assyria, preached to the people of Nineveh, pronounced God's judgment upon the city and called on the Ninevites to turn from their evil ways.

As a result of his preaching, Ninevah repented and made amends ---- and God spared the city.

Was Jonah happy with such a positive the result from his preaching?

Not at all! Jonah was very upset that God would spare such a wicked gentile city – was very upset that God would show mercy on people who were not Jews.

You see, the prophet Jonah, like ALL the Jews of the day, abhorred even the idea of salvation for the Gentiles for people of other races.

In the final chapter, God chastised Jonah for this attitude, and the Book of Jonah affirms that God's mercy and grace are for everyone, extending even to the gentile inhabitants of a hated foreign city.

The God of creation was a God for all nations.

What a story! The Book of Jonah has everything—a 'Days of our Lives' indeed -- hatred, racism, religious intolerance, disobedience, rebellion, despair, hope and salvation. It was all these themes that the self-serving egotist, Donald Trump exploited to win the American Presidency.

However, unlike Days of our Lives, I don't see any love in the story, except the love of God for humankind – the selfless love of the creator God.

We all laugh at the improbability of Jonah being 3 days inside a big fish, but that is certainly only a fable.

What we often fail to see is that while Jonah is a disciple sent out to do God's work, he is a most reluctant, recalcitrant and disobedient disciple.

The first message from the Book of Jonah is that when we refuse to do the will of God, there is **no hiding from God**. Each transgression leads to another until our sum of misdemeanours is too great to hide and our very personalities are changed by them.

My mother used to say 'be sure your sins will find you out'. I hated her saying this, but the longer I live, the truer these words have become.

Jonah was a bigoted, self-willed and imperfect prophet, yet God saw hope and faithfulness in Jonah and chose him to do a difficult job and expected him to carry it out. Jesus chose his followers, his disciples on exactly the same principles.

Neither Jonah nor the disciples always understood their roles in God's scheme for the world and they were not always faithful to their tasks.

We see this when even though Jonah obeyed God, and was eventually faithful in carrying out his task, he did not believe God had things figured out correctly and he was unhappy with God's decision to save a racially and religiously adulterated society. And while we can shake our heads over Jonah's intransigence, we can see a great deal of ourselves in this story, and a great deal of our own beliefs and thoughts in those of Jonah.

When all is not right in the world, God, through the ministry of Jesus, tries to get us to alter our behaviour and fix it.

Yet how often do we fail to live as Jesus commanded? We need to make constant confessions of our short comings so we can be constantly forgiven by God.

How often do we, as thinking humans, know what is right rather than listening to God ?

How often do we focus on our needs and beliefs rather than seek what is best for others?

The second message from the Book of Jonah is that, no matter how wayward and wilful we are, God's Grace is available **to all who repent and who seek it.**

When all was grim inside the fish what did Jonah do? He called on God in prayer! He wrote;

"In my distress I called to God and God answered me.

*From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and God listened to my cry.*

*When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, GOD
and my prayer rose to you.*

With shouts of grateful praise, I will sacrifice to you.

'Salvation comes from God.'"

How often do we ignore the words of God until we find ourselves in a great mess --- then we pray earnestly for help. It is no coincidence that during times of crisis, churches see people they have seldom, if ever, seen while the world was rosy. Hospital chapels and chaplains hear the cries of help and repentance daily. The COVID virus has brought people to churches and onto their knees in prayer -people who have not entered the church or prayed for years.—and their prayers are heart felt and sincere.

We humans, who have eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, we think we have our little worlds all sorted out, think we are self-sufficient and able --- until some quirk of creation pulls us down.

Thank goodness God does not punish us when we go astray!!

God still cares when we do not nurture the beautiful world God created

God still cares – through our times of neglect, through our times of pride and superiority, through our times of indifference and lack of regard for the feelings of our fellow humans.

God's grace is an ever present miracle. ***The surprising thing is that we don't appreciate this grace more.***

We want the world to be just like us --- whatever that may be. The fact that Jesus in all likelihood had dark middle eastern skin with a hooked nose never enters our personal image of Jesus. We imagine him to be just like the man in the house next door.

But the Jonah story is telling us clearly that God loves ALL HUMANKIND.

God is **not** racist **nor** is God a member of the Australian Uniting Church. God does not see black or white, Asian eyes or Afro hair --- or gender.

These differences are only **minor genetic variants** in the human genome. In fact, we are all on one great genetic continuum, each person differing genetically from the next person, yet all the product of the one great blueprint of life.

And note: we should be **celebrating** diversity rather than decrying and fearing differences. Along with the French we should be saying 'vive la difference' because genetic variation leads to healthy gene pools and strength in future generations.

As Shylock said in the Merchant of Venice,

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, senses, affections, passions; If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?"

The God of the Jews, the Christians, the Muslims, the Buddhists, etc etc -- this God is the Creator of the world- my God, your God, their God.

We Christians choose to follow the teachings of Jesus, Son of God, Prince of Peace who taught that love is the greatest force in the world. When we love and follow the ministry of Jesus, the Holy Spirit walks with us, helping us find the grace of God that passes all human understanding, bringing us spiritual peace.

Our task is to be **obedient to the demands of God**, trying to see other people as God sees them, accepting, loving -- and caring for all.

That, I believe, is the message from the Book of Jonah- the man who **tried** to disobey God. This is the constant message throughout Jesus's ministry and taught by Christians ever since Pentecost.

And a constant message and request from Jesus was that we don't only accept those who are different from us, but that we *learn to live alongside them*, learn to understand their points of view, seeing their world as a normal expression of humanity.

It is a message for Australia and the world today: accept differences, accept God's grace, understand that God is a God for all humankind -- or else creation as we know it may not survive.

It should go without saying that black lives DO INDEED matter and we MUST acknowledge the needs and **history of the first peoples of Australia**, weaving **our very new story** into their age-old history acknowledging the debt we all owe the first peoples for the care and understanding they have bestowed upon our wonderful land for thousands of years.

Only by accepting and appreciating the uniquely exotic and very different legacy they bring, only by accepting their role in the making of our country, only then can we settle down and become truly one nation, learning from each other, genuinely neighbours.

Like my little grand daughters, we all find it hard to accept what is different, but our message from God through the Book of Jonah is clear: different is normal and OK – don't fight it----get used to it.

And the grace of God will bring you peace.