

Sermon for fifteenth Sunday after Trinity (Sunday 24th September 2017) - *Mike Fox*

Jonah 3:10-4:11
Matthew 20:1-16

Jonah's Anger; Jonah Is Reproved
The Labourers in the Vineyard

When Rosemary and I went to worship with our young family at the Abbey on Iona for the first time many years ago, I was struck by the command at the beginning of the bible



reading: “*Listen now for the **Word of God***”; it’s a good command and an indication that we are to be attentive to what is read and to act upon it. “Sit up and listen; focus on nothing else” it seemed to say ... and “*Listen **now** ...*” reinforced the point that there is no time but the present. We often hear the reader say at the end: “*This is the word of the Lord*” to which we respond: “***Thanks be to God***” ... and rightly so; we have been given divine wisdom and we are grateful – now we can draw upon it.

How do we listen for the Word of God? One of the difficulties that we face in listening to a reading during worship is that we are only given a short extract from a much longer passage. In the case of Jonah, it is quite simple to go away and read the whole book afterwards to understand the context of the little bit that we heard. It only occupies four short chapters on about two pages. The bit that we heard just now doesn’t make a lot of sense unless we are reminded of the whole story. Jonah is a prophet. At least, we can gather that from the first two verses in chapter 1 – verse 1 says that “*the word of the Lord came to Jonah ...*” and verse 2 tells him to “*go at once to Nineveh and cry out against it*”. So, that’s Jonah’s mission: to go out and tell the people how wicked they are, to turn from their evil ways and believe in God. Jonah, however, is not a great prophet – verse 3 tells us that he ran away; he didn’t want to face up to his commission and he went down to Joppa and took a boat headed for Tarshish. God was clearly angry with Jonah because he caused a great wind to spring up and threaten the safety of the boat and its crew. It’s interesting that Jonah went below and, like Jesus on the Sea of Galilee with his disciples, was able to sleep soundly despite everything that was crashing round about him.



The crew didn’t know what to do for the best, so they started casting the cargo overboard in the hope that a lighter vessel would be less likely to sink. That didn’t do any good at all and they were running out of ideas until Jonah spoke up and said that the storm was all his fault for running away from his responsibilities. If they were to toss him overboard, everything would calm down and they could carry on safely without him, though the point of the voyage is a little suspect now without their cargo. They were reluctant at first, but being persuaded that they wouldn’t be accused of reckless behaviour, they took Jonah at his word, threw him overboard and the sea immediately ceased from its raging. Jonah is now in the wrong place and God provides a large fish to swallow him up and spew him out on dry land three days later when he had

come to his senses. So, we get to chapter 3 and hear the same message that started the book. Jonah is to go to Nineveh and proclaim the wickedness of the people that would surely bring disaster upon them – this time, Jonah does what he is told, but without any great effort on his part, the whole population turned from their evil ways and God spares them. So, the first time Jonah was called to serve God, he ran away and the second time Jonah was called, God does the work instead and Jonah is angry; he is effectively redundant and goes off to sulk. That's where we picked up the story today.

When we hear a story like Jonah's, *how do we listen for the Word of God?* When I went on my sabbatical nearly six years ago, I started with an individually guided silent retreat



at Douai Abbey. I was allocated to Father Gervase, who could easily have been a prophet – he had a sharp mind, penetrating eyes and fuzzy grey hair sticking out all over the place, like Einstein – terrifying! For the first 24 hours, he asked me to walk with Jonah and we would meet up again tomorrow to explore all that God was saying to me through that story; there is always a great deal to explore in scripture. That's why we spend the first half of our ministry team

meetings dwelling on a reading and picking out what it is saying to us, what words or phrases stand out, how it relates to us and how it might influence our ministry. It is a three-way engagement between the words from others in the passage, the impact it has on us personally and the Word of God dwelling in our hearts interpreting it so that we can bring it to bear on the matters we have come to discuss.

As an example, the story of Jonah might be telling us to pause and reflect on what our role really is and then, when we come to address it seriously, to put our heart and soul into it. At the end of the book, God says that there are 120,000 people in Nineveh who do not know their right hand from their left. Jonah could have helped them discover much more about the meaning of life if he'd tried, but he hasn't; Jonah is frustrated and probably angry with himself as much as with God because he hasn't yet found his purpose in life; he feels depressed and very unfulfilled.

*How do we **listen** for the Word of God?*



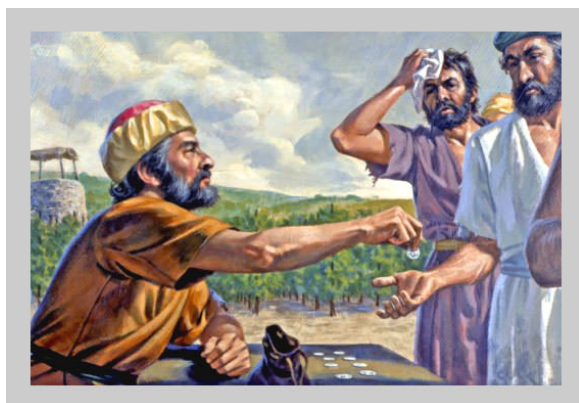
Today is the second Sunday in which we invite you to take the Church Life forms and seriously consider your role here at St.Nicholas. You may feel that you are doing enough already, but it may be that you would like to try something new; there's even a space for suggesting something that you could offer that we have not included – go on, take a leap of faith and see where it takes you. Don't run away like Jonah to what God is saying to you, and don't get angry like Jonah when what you feel you might offer is being done by someone else or in a different way; there will usually be scope for joining in and sharing; that's what God's kingdom is all about. And, instead of walking with Jonah, maybe you could think of walking with someone else in need. We have a small group of folk at St.Nicholas who have become involved over the last three years with asylum seekers; it's

tremendously rewarding when we achieve something with them, but can also be challenging. At our meeting last Monday, we reviewed where we were with about a dozen adults and their nine children that we have got to know well. It is on-going work but very worthwhile. If anyone would like to join us, that would be great; we are keen to expand the group if we can; just tick the box on the form and we can explore it further.



The gospel reading is also important to me because it was the passage that I chose to read and speak about at the second Workers' Memorial service that I conducted at GKN Land Systems in 2012. Almost everyone on site came; there were probably 600 there – it was a large gathering. I suspect that they came, not because of the chaplain, or because of the union reps, or even because their manager had told them to, but because of the

free lunch that the management had laid on; it was good to enjoy the support of the management team. Anyway, one of the operation managers in the wheel shop had a dilemma. There was too much work over there and too few people; could he have some of the folk over in the structures division? Not a problem, until it came to deciding how to pay them. For the same work, they were paid more in the one area than the other and the poor manager had been tying himself up in knots trying to fathom what to do. He didn't want to increase the wages bill unnecessarily and he didn't want to cut people's wages either. This parable of Jesus spoke to him and he came up and asked where it had come from – easy enough to answer that, but the important thing was that, through it he had to *listen for the Word of God* in deciding what to do in his particular situation. It gave him an opportunity to follow the teachings of the parable, being fair to all. They stayed with the unequal pay structure and everyone was satisfied.



So, *how do we listen for the Word of God?* From the bible stories, I would suggest that we simply spend time with them, and then perhaps carry them around with us. That's why the Benedictine monks have so many services through the day – in between services, they can carry their insights into their daily life. We can become one of the characters in the story for a while – try being Jonah for a bit and see where he takes you; we can let the stories speak to us about our current situation – try being one of the people being addressed by one of the parables of Jesus; we can become still, as it says in Psalm 46, and allow God to speak to us directly: "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble ... be still and know that I am God.*" [Psalm 46:1, 10]

... in the name of the Father; the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN