

Our Scriptural story today is spectacularly dramatic: typically Jewish in style and wonderfully over-the-top! The prophet Jonah was enraged that God's nature was gracious, compassionate and long-suffering. He shouted at God: 'I knew you would let me down! Why did I try to flee to Tarshish: to get away from you!' Jonah shouted: 'The Ninevites have turned from their wickedness and you have relented: you promised punishment! Some God you are!'

With a heavy heart, Jonah said he knew that God was 'a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love'. These words of grace were first spoken by God on Mount Sinai; God descended in the cloud, stood before Moses, and spoke of mercy, love and forgiveness. We know the colourful, imaginative story of Jonah, Nineveh, the tempest and the great fish. For three days, Jonah lived in the belly of the fish, or was it a whale?

The punchline comes in the final chapter: it is the unfathomable mercy of God, an unconditional love and forgiveness for everyone. Nineveh had long since vanished when the book of Jonah was written: this is theatrical fiction told to impart truth. Nineveh had been the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Provocatively, one Jewish commentator says that sending Jonah to Nineveh was like sending a Jewish speaker to teach morality to the Nazis in Berlin in 1936. Jonah did not want to go. Imaginative, colourful and also shocking, the purpose of the Jonah story is to display unequivocally the immense, immeasurable love of the Divine – for everyone. There is no wound, certainly no self-inflicted wound, that God will not bind up and heal.

Earlier this year, the former Episcopal Primus, Richard Holloway, wrote about his friendship with the Catholic Archbishop, Cardinal Keith O'Brien. O'Brien was expelled from Scotland following his admission of inappropriate relationships with priests. Holloway had known Keith O'Brien over the years but was very disappointed when, on receiving the red hat of Cardinal, O'Brien had become volubly homophobic. Holloway writes:

I had a sweet correspondence with him before he died. I think he had reconciled himself. I sent him an affectionate letter saying I hoped he was doing well, and he wrote back to say that he had learnt some lessons and he was at peace with himself and where he was. He felt forgiven and understood and had reconciled to all the things that had happened. He was quite rueful.

Holloway says it is always our ‘failures and sins and never our successes’ that can lead to self-improvement and a humbler disposition for both individuals and institutions. The mercy and tenderness of God reaches everyone.

The nineteenth century mystic, George Matheson, sought meaning *in* his moments of suffering. For Matheson, it was not simply that he sought God in suffering, but that his suffering meant something and led him further on his inner journey. Matheson said he sought the joy of harvest; in other words, that from the buried grain of his life harvest would come. In prayer, Matheson said:

Reveal to me the meaning of my failures. Teach me the track of the path I deemed trackless. Show me the angel sitting on the tomb of my buried self. Show me that the man with whom I wrestled at Peniel was a man from heaven....Show me that there was manna in my desert, which even Canaan did not hold.

For Matheson, our wilderness experiences are as formative and as much of God as those on the mountain top. It seems the God of whom Jonah spoke and the God encountered by O'Brien and Matheson is the Holy One who promised and promises grace, mercy and love. St Thérèse said that, 'The LORD is vibrant with joy!' That joy overflows into every atom of the evolving universe: we gather in worship today in the Presence of Transcendent Love, a love bestowed equally on everyone.

In your story and mine, on our journeys, it is helpful, surely, to slowly, patiently, regularly immerse ourselves in the tender love of the Sacred, aware we are held and embraced. The English mystic, Julian of Norwich, who lived through the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt, wrote of God as Mother; the One who gives birth to us, and who bestows upon us infinite grace. In that most familiar vision of the hazelnut, she said:

He showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, 'What is this?' And the answer came, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my

mind supplied the answer, 'It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it'. In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God.

God's mercy is written across the pages of the Bible: in Deuteronomy, the Psalms, Lamentations, Micah, Matthew, Luke, Ephesians, Hebrews, James, and others. The psalmist said, 'The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made'.

Ninevites, if they are anything, are those who are different from us. What is the message of Jonah for today? Numerous times over many years, I have attended services of worship with people – pilgrims – of other world faiths. On one occasion, I attended worship at the Mandir, the Hindu Temple in Edinburgh. Standing side by side with Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and other Christians, we worshipped and meditated through the chants and ritual of Hinduism. Unity is spiritual; it is of the heart. All share in God's love equally, all pursue inner peace, shalom or the Buddha nature. Perhaps the curse of religion, including Christianity, is exclusivity: the crude belief that only *we* have the truth. Exclusivity is a sin; it was the sin of Jonah.

The Jewish scholar, Laura Bernstein, writes:

There is no uglier blemish on the face of religion than the running sore of exclusivism, filled with all the poison of religious arrogance and egotism.....

The world will one day belong to those who realise, as Hinduism teaches, that they are divine. Those who, as Buddhism reminds us, are truly awake, enlightened, and compassionate. Those who, as Islam declares, strive for justice and peace. Those who, as Judaism proclaims, seek righteousness and mercy and walk humbly with God. Those who, as Christianity announces, live and love in the world as Jeshu did.

Jesus was intoxicated with His consciousness of *the One* who fills all things, all worlds, all world faiths; who feeds each one equally and who is to be found not only on the mountain top but mysteriously, mystically, in human struggle and suffering. Amen.