



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

A prophet for our time?

Readings: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10, Ps 24, 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31, Mark 1: 14-20

The Book of the Prophet Jonah is unique among the prophetic works. Sandwiched between the brief and obscure Obadiah and the better known Messianic prophecies of Micah, Jonah is composed, not of prophetic utterances but of an, at once terrifying, charming, amusing and profound story.

Although what scholars refer to as ‘a minor prophet’ – one of the twelve thus catalogued, it is worth reflecting that he is the only minor prophet to get a mention in the Koran – he gets his own chapter – and, more importantly Jonah is the reading for the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the most solemn day of the Jewish year. He is also, to top it all, referenced by Jesus in the context of Christ’s mission and miracle of Resurrection. ‘Something greater than Jonah is here,’ Jesus tells the crowds who want to know who He is.

There are two ways of reading Jonah – as a literal story or as an allegory or instructive myth. The two readings, I hasten to add, are not mutually exclusive.

Jonah is the very image of the reluctant evangelist and, as such, is perhaps the prophet for our time and our culture. Summoned by

God to go and preach to Nineveh, Jonah unhesitatingly 'legs it' to the farthest place on earth. There are several ironies in the opening sentence. First we are told that his dad is called Amittai – which means 'faithful and true' – and clearly Jonah has immediately betrayed his patrimony. Second, he believes in the one true God, creator of all things, yet perversely and ludicrously believes that sheer geography will enable him to escape his vocation. This is highlighted later when he explains to the pagan sailors whose ship he has boarded to flee. They are incredulous at his stupidity.

Jonah's point is, it turns out, that he knows very well that the people of Nineveh, representing the whole pagan world, will never listen to a prophet of God. The mission is pointless, futile.

Jonah – his name means 'Dove' and he represents Israel, the people of God - does not trust the power of God's Word nor the wisdom of God's plan. He does not believe in the possibility of repentance for the gentiles and disapproves of the intended mercy of God for the sinner. He thinks, with human reason, that if he goes to Nineveh the best that can happen is to be ignored or sneered at. The worst is that he will get a good kicking – possibly fatal. With his impeccable human logic he overrides the call of God and the priority of the Gospel and high tails it to Tarshish, the farthest point of the known world.

We will be familiar with Jonah.....not least through our own reluctance to evangelise. We mull over in our heads the likelihood of a favourable response to any such brave outreach. We tell ourselves that it is pointless. Look around you – who is going to listen. In so doing, of course, we deny our calling, reject the truth and faithfulness of our fathers, doubt the power of the Word and

assume that we know better than God.

‘Your plan won’t work,’ we whisper to God, as if He were some elderly gent rehearsing old improbable battles. AND
‘Include me out. They won’t listen’, as we book our passage to Tarshish.

Cut to the Gospel..... Here we see the Apostles being called. Again, to us, it looks improbable at worst, at best a kind of response that is best left to saints not ordinary folk. They, in contrast to Jonah, abandon all to serve Jesus, the Lord. Who, in their right mind, would simply ‘down tools’ and set off like that? Well, of course, it doesn’t actually happen like that. There is, as the Gospel relates, a back story. These men have been to the Jordan, followed the Baptist,, heard his testimony to Jesus, followed Him home, talked with Him, decided that He is, in all probability , the Messiah. Now He comes to their workplace on the Galilee shoreline and calls them to follow. This is the moment when their experience, research, conversations and conclusions are challenged to become a living reality. In that context their response is immediate but not irrational or emotional. Their moment has come....and they take it.

Cut back to Jonah.....At the end of the book we see his disappointment. The blasted pagans have, against all the odds, repented and God has been merciful to them. It is not what Jonah either expected or wanted. Here we see part of his reluctance to answer his calling. Either it wasn’t going to work OR , perish the thought, it would work and these awful people would be saved. In short, he didn’t have a heart for salvation.

The questions that arise for us from these passages are simple. Do we respond to our calling to evangelise? Do we care if other people are saved? Do we trust the Word of God? Are we prepared for any response – remember that , unlike Jonah, many of the great prophets were not ‘successful’ BUT they were faithful. That is what God looks for in us, sons and daughters of Amittai – the True Faith.

Or are we on the boat to Tarshish?

But then, as any priest will tell you, from his own experience, – You can get on the boat to Tarshish but you’ll never get away from the Lord and His call.