

Dear Friends,

The one thing everyone knows about Jonah is that he was swallowed by a whale, but there is more to his story than that. It is told in one of the shortest books of Scripture which can easily be read straight through in one sitting. (The excerpt we hear in the first reading of this Sunday's Mass is only a brief snippet). Apart from the name of his father the book tells nothing about Jonah - what he is, where he comes from. He is however chosen by God for a special mission, to preach repentance to the people of the great city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire. God is offended by the Ninevites' notorious wickedness and tells Jonah to go to the city and cry out against it.

It seems that for some reason we are not told about Jonah does not want to carry out this mission and goes on board a ship to take him in the opposite direction away from Nineveh. During the voyage a great storm gets up. The sailors realise there is something suspicious about Jonah: they blame their plight on his disobedience to God and throw him overboard. This is the point where the famous whale, or great fish, appears to swallow Jonah whole and take him back to his starting point and disgorge him on the shore. Jonah thinks that since everything, even the forces of nature, is conspiring to make him do God's will, there is nothing for it but to do what God wants him to do. So he sets out for Nineveh and threatens the city with destruction. And the king and his people are immediately converted. They take to heart his message: they do indeed repent and fast in sackcloth and ashes - even the animals dress in sackcloth!

Again for an unexplained reason Jonah is unhappy that his words have had the desired effect and sits down in a sulk outside the city. God causes a bush to grow to protect Jonah with its shade, but then sends a worm to eat up the bush, so that Jonah is exposed to the heat of the scorching sun and feels so faint he wants to die. God asks Jonah why he should be concerned about the bush which grew up and withered in a day and why he, God, should not be concerned about the great city, its thousands of inhabitants and their animals.

The tale ends on this enigmatic close. We can read it as another story about a prophet who is reluctant to carry out God's will, but finds that he cannot evade it and that when he does accept God's will for himself it works out as God intends. But why Jonah should be so unhappy about that remains mysterious.

You can read a sermon about Jonah in chapter 9 of another strange, much longer book, *Moby Dick*. In the port of New Bedford, as they prepare to follow Captain Ahab in his ill-fated expedition, the sailors gather in the Whaleman's Chapel, where the chaplain Father Mapple preaches to them (in the film version he is played by Orson Welles: Ahab is Gregory Peck). The high pulpit where he stands is made to look like the prow of a ship, with no stairs up into it, but only a rope ladder which you can pull up after you. In his sermon Father Mapple naturally goes to town on the story of Jonah. He concludes:

'Delight is to him, who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven. Delight is to him, whom all the waves of the billows of the seas of the boisterous mob can never shake from this sure Keel of the Ages. And eternal delight and deliciousness will be his, who coming to lay him down, can say with his final breath - O Father!'

This is maybe not what the book of Jonah suggests to us, but our journey of faith can surely be as uncertain and tangled as his, as we seek to remain true to God through all the twists and turns, the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows of life as it is in this sort of world. But we will know, as perhaps Jonah did, that God is our only secure refuge and that if we set God and his will at the centre of our lives we will come through. Our lives on the surface may go on in the same way, but at the heart of us we will know that we are in God and God is in us, and therefore, as Julian of Norwich said, All will be well and all manner of things will be well.

Julian lived in 14th century England, a time of much unrest and conflict, a time when plague stalked the land and thousands died of the terrible Black Death; but if you read her works you can see that her assurance that with God all be well is no mere wishful thinking, but comes very much out of her own spiritual journey, her wrestling with darkness and doubt, and her realisation that in the end God is the only sure reliance we have. This she came to see through her own personal relationship with God in Christ, and it is of course Christ who for us as Christians is the human face of God, the one above all who shows us who God is and how he relates to us: that his desire is always for our wellbeing, our healing and forgiveness, since he is in his essential nature a God of universal love of compassion.

The Gospel reading for this Sunday is the calling of the first disciples, to whom Jesus says: 'You are fishermen, I will make you fishers of men.' I was once on a boat trip across the sea of Galilee where Peter and the others fished. The water was a dead calm, quiet and peaceful. I was almost disappointed as I remembered the story of a storm getting up on the lake, which storms can do suddenly in that region, and Jesus sleeping awoke to the sailors' cries and settled the waters for them, saying, 'Why do you have so little faith?' I wondered what might happen if we experienced a similar storm in our sturdy boat! (You may know that the word nave, for the central area of a church, comes from the Latin word for a ship, and church rooves did often look like the upturned keel of a ship: the Church indeed is often described as the ship of faith in which we can travel safely).

The earliest disciples had the great advantage of knowing Jesus at first hand. We see him with the eyes of faith; we can know him in ourselves, in other people, in the events of our lives, in prayer and the sacraments - above all in the body and blood of the Eucharist. But the more we nurture our knowledge of God by these means the stronger and more secure our faith can be - and then we will be able to show others the face of God in Christ. We are called by God to love and serve him in our own way as his people.

The ancient city of Nineveh was the centre of one of the greatest empires of its day, but like other empires - Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Roman, British - it had immense power for a time, but has not endured, though it was sad that the surviving ruins of the city were deliberately destroyed by ISIL when it controlled that area. Nineveh is located near the Iraqi city of Mosul, which has suffered so much in recent history. What remains of the grandeur that once was can be a sign to us of the fragility of human endeavours, that our achievements and possessions come and go, and that God alone is the lasting rock on which we can build and trust.

Wishing you many blessings in this coming week,

Fr. Robin

[robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk](mailto:robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)