

Jonah 3

Jonah Goes to Nineveh

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Luke 11: 29-32

The Sign of Jonah

As the crowds increased, Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to

this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now something greater than Jonah is here.

My grandmother was a country woman, though she lived most of her life in London. She was not superstitious - I don't think, but she had a fund of folklore sayings. some of which were close to peoples ancient beliefs about signs that could influence your life-superstition! Tragedy would come if red and white flowers were places together in a vase, the bad luck of a black cat crossing your path. Bad things always coming in threes.

Maybe your grandmothers had similar ideas.

And some people still see signs of impending bad or good fortune around them. What about those who trust in their star sign?

How much more was the case in the ancient world when there was so much less scientific control over life. If illness came it was because you had sinned - we still hear that echoed in the plea, he didn't deserve that disease. Even in Jewish society God may be angry and you will be punished - which is why some parts of Jesus society were obsessed by keeping the law. Signs of significance seemed all around, mostly for bad, but sometimes for good.

So Jesus was challenged to give a sign of his significance as a God anointed person - even the Messiah.

Surely the human Jesus must have thought you are not listening to my words you are not seeing what I am doing. He reminds them of two episodes from their scriptures.

The story of Jonah is most likely to be a parable, showing Human disobedience, Gods persistence, forgiveness and triumph in bringing non-Israelites to himself. It may have been written in the 4th or 5th centuries BC. It's actually quite amusing.

We have heard that part of the story, where Jonah having run in the opposite direction from Nineveh is given a second chance to preach to the people.

This time Jonah obeyed, and it took three days to walk from one side of the city to the other. Jonah doesn't preach a very encouraging message - you are doomed he says, like Private Fraser in Dads army - you are doomed, if you don't repent. There is a lot of irony in the book. perhaps he had billboard and a loud voice, but was obviously very persuasive - well, he had God behind him.

And the people repent, whole heartedly, with the king ordering a fast and sackcloth, even for the animals.

So, Jesus reminds his opponents of Jonah, where he was a sign to the city of Nineveh who repented and turned to God. He says

For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.

We can realise that the three days in the whale, three days to cross Nineveh, could also be seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus' three days in the tomb and the drawing of people of every nation (Gentiles) to Jesus as a sign of Gods inclusivity - which was so hard for the Jews of the time to accept.

Jesus also points to another Old Testament sign though this one is more historical. The visit of the foreign Queen of Sheba to listen and absorb Solomons wisdom. And now, Says Jesus, something greater than Solomon is here - and by implication - you are not listening to the wisdom of God, I am telling you.

Sometimes we think when we have our doubting moments - for Goodness' sake, God, do something send assign to show you are in charge.

Make that person well again. don't let them die, stop the war. That is a big one. But God very seldom works like that, he works in hearts and minds to change things towards him.

Today is St David's day and we can remember the Bishop of St David's in Wales who was so influential in spreading the word of God through Wales, though his influence was wider than that. He lived in the 6th century AD 1400 years ago, and signs and wonders were very much part of his age - and are incorporated into his much later written Biographies. He founded the monastery at St David's in Pembrokeshire, on the site of its now delightful cathedral.

But with all the later signs and wonders associated with him, he, too was working in hearts and minds to turn them to God, that people of his day might live more abundantly as Jesus promised: David's final words were '*Be Joyful. Keep the Faith. Do the little things that you have heard and seen me do.*'

Let us try to do that too.

[Janet Lawrence]