

### **Jonah 3, Luke 11:29-32**

I will start, for once, with an insider joke. The insiders are those who were there the last time I preached. You may remember my list of texts to avoid. Well, Jonah was pretty much at the top of the list. Now if you didn't understand the joke, at the end of the service, you could turn to your neighbour and use this as an ice breaker: "What is it about the list and Jonah? I didn't understand the joke."

You may also choose to say: "What was it about the sermon today? I didn't understand anything!" Well, I hope this won't be the case.

We are going further in our mini-series about the book of Jonah. Few weeks ago, at the all-in service, we were introduced to Chapter One with the prophet Jonah, who was called by God. Verse 1 of the book says: 'The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."'

We followed Jonah as he fled from this assignment and from God by sailing in the opposite direction. To his dismay, he was stopped by a giant storm sent by God and thrown overboard by the sailors he embarked with. You may remember how the author insisted on the fact that the sailors showed much more respect for God and human life than Jonah did.

Two weeks ago, we read about the prayer of repentance that Jonah whispered from inside the big fish that God had sent to rescue him. With this prayer, we reflected about our own need for grace.

This week we move on to Chapter 3, and the very first thing that strikes us is that it starts almost word for word as Chapter 1: ' "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.”

The story seems to start over again. Yet, the big difference now is that Jonah obeys. He goes to Nineveh. The author insists on presenting Nineveh as a ‘very large city’. This is probably to emphasise the scale of the task. It seems that this could also be translated as ‘Nineveh, a large city for God’, and with this the author shows the importance that God attached to the people there.

Jonah’s strategy seems very simple; he walks through the city and proclaims a very direct message: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’ Other translations have: ‘annihilated’. In the original, this is the same wording that the Old Testament almost exclusively used to refer to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Jonah doesn’t seem to need the full three days to go through the city because the Ninevites are particularly receptive to his message. From the greatest to the least, they put on sackcloth and fast. The King himself – who is most probably the King of the Assyrian empire - descends from his throne, takes off his royal robes, covers himself with sackcloth and sits down in the dust. He issues a decree ordering a three-day fast to every human being and every beast. In fact, the organisation of the text suggests that the decree is not what brings things in motion. Instead, it appears like a bottom-up process where a great part of the Ninevites have already decided to humble themselves before God. They do not only give external signs of repentance, by sitting down in ashes and wearing sackcloth, in fact, the decree also urges the Ninevites to ‘give up their evil ways and their violence’.

Now, I find this readiness of the Ninevites to obey God's word quite unexpected. We are so used to the story of Jonah that we may miss this element of surprise. But there are two reasons why this penitence movement comes unexpected. The first one is the notorious wickedness of the Ninevites, which brought them judgement in the first place. The author does not spend much time describing the evildoings for which the Ninevites are being judged for. This was probably self-evident to his primary readers. What we have as main Biblical source is the Book of Nahoum, that also contains a proclamation about Nineveh, only one century later. 'Woe to the city of blood, says Nahoum, full of lies, full of plunder, never without prey.' In fact, the likeness of their sentence with that of Sodom and Gomorrah is a clear hint to how estranged they were from God. Yet, unlike Sodom and Gomorrah, they do not react by adding further to their faults. Instead, they turn readily to God. And this I find quite surprising.

The second reason that makes it even more surprising to me is the lack of effort that Jonah puts in his appeal. If you go through most of the stories of prophets in the Bible, you will see a great degree of sophistication in their proclamation. The book of Nahoum is a very elaborate poetry calling the Ninevites to renounce their evildoing. The prophet Ezekiel created a diorama of the city of Jerusalem under siege and enacted God's judgement over the city for two full years. The prophet Jeremiah made straps and yoke-bars, and put them on his own neck, then sent such yokes to other kings in the regions, to warn them from God's coming judgement. The prophet Isaiah preached at least partly naked and barefoot for three years to warn the people of Egypt against the consequences of their sin.

What did Jonah do? Walk for one day in the city of Nineveh. And my personal feeling is that he is not really putting his heart into it. 'Forty days and your city will be annihilated.' That's it. No sophisticated poetry, no personification, no visual metaphor that would stir the heart to see the ugliness of sin as God sees it. And yet, the whole city falls on its knee.

The surprise effect is even stronger when you think of the contrast with the first two chapters of the book of Jonah. Jonah is offered a second chance after he repents from disobeying God. But to reach this point of repentance, he must go through a supernatural storm that endangers him and the crew of a ship, he almost loses his life when drowning in the mediterranean sea, and finally, he spends three days inside a big fish. Only then does Jonah reach the point where he yields to God's voice. God must corner Jonah to the point of no escape before he comes to his right mind. The contrast can't be stronger. The people from Nineveh turn promptly to God, and God offers them a second chance.

Why such a contrast? I think the author deliberately emphasises the gap between Jonah and the Ninevites. I think he wants to bring into light the fact that even if they were chosen by God to be his people, the Israelites are not necessarily better than the rest of humankind. What's more: God deeply cares for other countries, other cities and villages.

I wish to point your attention to how the author achieves the contrast between Jonah's attitude and the one of the Ninevites. We are never really given the perspective of the Ninevites, are we? By this, I mean that we never really know how they are caused to take Jonah's word so seriously and to turn so swiftly to God. Some commentators point to geopolitical and economic turmoil at this time that may have caused the ruling authorities

to listen to Jonah's message. But these are only speculations. The author remains very silent on this. We are never offered the perspective of the Ninevites.

I wish we would, for what I believe is that God has been stirring things in Nineveh some time before Jonah even appears in the city. I believe he has prepared their hearts long before he called Jonah. How he did so, we don't know. By this, I don't mean that the Ninevites are puppets in the hand of God. The Ninevites must make a real choice of repentance. Our text in the New Testament shows how remarkable their choice is. Confronted with the flimsy proclamation of Jonah, they still choose to turn to God. Others supposedly more righteous had the advantage of hearing Jesus, the Son of God, but turned against him. The choice of Ninevites to repent is in many points surprising and remarkable, yet we know little about how this comes to be.

The irony is that the Ninevites also are never offered the full story, or more exactly they are never offered Jonah's story. They know nothing about Jonah's hatred for them, nothing about the storm. They don't know about the big fish, or about Jonah's second chance. They certainly never knew that in Chapter 4 of the book of Jonah, God used them to teach a lesson of compassion to Jonah. From where they stood, Jonah was someone of great probity who enjoyed a privileged relationship with God. This can make anyone who reads the first two chapters laugh out loud. But this is like the insider joke, unless you are given the full story, you miss the point. And here, the Ninevites know nothing about the life of Jonah.

There are many things that one can take out of this text, for example, God's great compassion or the remarkable repentance of the Ninevites. But today I would like to dwell on this point: we do not have the full perspective; we do not know the full story. Why is this significant?

We live in a society where we are continuously presented with a peculiar definition of individual freedom: 'As long as what I do does not harm anyone, I am free to do it.' I can choose how I live, as long as I am not a nuisance to you. And better now, I can partly control when and how I die. My choice, my decisions, my consequences. My sins, if any, are largely a private matter. But this view ignores one crucial point. How on earth am I supposed to know if I harm anyone, when I do not have the full perspective, when I do not know the full story?

The Christian tradition and the story of Jonah teach us a different point of view. We can only think that our choices and our sins are a private matter if we choose to ignore the full perspective. We do not know the full story, so we choose to do as if it didn't exist. But sin is never a private matter. The cruelty and violence of the Ninevites caused Jonah to harbour hatred against them to the point where he preferred to disobey God. And in turn, Jonah's refusal to minister to the Ninevites kept them away from God's compassion. But conversely, when Jonah decided to do the right thing, he initiated a swift repentance of the Ninevites. The repentance of the first Ninevites pushed their king to take the matter seriously. And as soon as the Ninevites repented, God could teach a unique lesson to Jonah.

The most striking is that when they made their decisions, neither Jonah, nor the Ninevites had the faintest idea that centuries later, Jesus would use them as a 'sign' for his generation.

The upshot is this: Even if we can never trace back the importance of every little choice we make, the story of Jonah teaches us that our choices matter to God. It mattered to God that Jonah obeyed his command. It mattered to God that the Ninevites turned away from their sins. And even when Jonah and the Ninevites did not understand it, their respective choices made a difference in each other's lives.

If what I say is true, and our choices have a greater significance than I can imagine, I must admit that I feel a sense of inadequacy for the task. Fortunately, I am reminded that God is the author of the whole story; he knows our finiteness and he can work even with the minimalist efforts of a reluctant prophet like Jonah. What God expects from us is far from being impossible. It is summarised in the words of the prophet Micah, and with this quote I would like to conclude:

‘[The Lord] has shown you [...] what is good.

And what does [he] require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.’