

Bennochy church: 22nd January 2012

It is not every day that you are swallowed by a fish. Jonah is one of those Old Testament stories that is a good read and I wonder what Steven Spielberg would do with it? It is after all one of those 'just in the nick of time' stories! It has also become one of the classical children's stories of the bible. I can remember my own son at school being one part of the whale...but like lots of well known stories, they become over simplified and our memories of what we remember tend to be selective. It is easy to miss the main point of this tale.

Like the first disciples, Jonah, his name means 'dove', and in this story stands for Israel, is called by God to go to Nineveh, but decides in his wisdom, it is not a job for him and he runs away from Gods call, in the totally opposite direction. If Jonah is Israel, Nineveh, an Assyrian city, is one of Israel's ancient enemies and represents not just the Gentile's but everything Israel stood against.

This is not history, it is not about applying a zoological yardstick to see if it is possible for a whale to swallow a man. This is parable, like the Good Samaritan. The impact on the original listeners would have been, what does this say about God, sending a prophet to seek the repentance of a Gentile people? Many of the original listeners would have been shocked! Indeed Jonah himself was not pleased at God's act of forgiveness, and may have been the reason for running away in the first place.

It does not surprise us that God catches him up! His boat gets caught in a storm, after drawing lots, sailors are a superstitious lot, he decides to tell the sailors he is running away from God, this is eventually seen as a bad omen and he is thrown overboard as a sacrifice to appease the Gods and swallowed by the large fish. (Not a whale) The implication then is that Jonah is repentant at what he has done as he reflects inside the fish and

then finds himself on the beach and decides to obey God and go to Nineveh.

He takes the role of the prophet and after a simple challenge to the people they decide to repent, including the king and the destruction of the city is halted, because God has changed his mind. To me it seems all too easy for Jonah at Nineveh! Jonah sulks at God's actions! He does not seem to understand that Israel is to be the 'light to the nations'. That the original covenant between Abraham and God was for all nations, not just Israel. Please read chapter 4 to see how the story ends.

Unlike Jonah, who was caught by the fish, the first disciples were people who caught fish and who now would be 'fishers of men' (song). Jesus had just been speaking about turning from sin and believing the Good News, here is a concrete example of people turning their lives over to God and compared to Jonah, theirs is an immediate response. I wonder, did it all happen just out of the blue or did they know something of Jesus before hand? These are not poor fishermen, but people who give up good businesses and family to follow Jesus. The detail is not important, but they were willing to leave their security and to follow in faith, they left their families, so important in ancient times, to respond to the call of Jesus. For how long? Would they ever return? That is how seriously they took it.

I wonder if we are Jonahs of the world, who hear the call of God but often go in the other direction or are we Simons or Andrews or James or Johns whose response was immediate, leaving all to follow Jesus, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. Remember Samuel, 'Here I am Lord, your servant is listening'.

God seems always give s another chance, sometimes it means going through difficult times, coming out the other side and realising that God is still there, stilling calling us. He has never left our side, even if we have

failed to recognise his presence. Life was not always easy for those first disciples, a new way to follow, a mixture of hope and challenge. It is no different for us. The one thing we can say about life is it never stays the same. We might wish to hold the tide of change back but it is a futile task. Those fishermen were tested to the limit of their trust as they followed Jesus. Jonah was taken to a place he did not wish to go. Why should it be any different for us?

And as they followed God and obeyed, the outcomes were not always what they wanted. Jonah was angry that God had forgiven his enemies. And there was Peter who did not understand that Christ must die (Mark 8) and who denied him three times. We have all been there, in some way angry with God, at other times denying him and misunderstanding his words to us.

At Bennoch church we face many challenges ahead. We cannot run away, God will find us. Instead, when we hear our names called, let us in faith and trust, follow Christ, into an unknown, yet exciting future. Amen.