

Jonah -- and Australia Day

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 25 January 2015, by David Gill. Readings were Jonah 3:1-5, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 and St Mark 1:14-20.

We owe today's first reading to one of the strangest prophets of the Hebrew people: Jonah.

In the first chapter, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah. "Stir yourself, my boy," says the Lord. "Go to Ninevah, and call that great city of the Assyrians to shape up quicksmart!"

"No way, Lord," replies the prophet. "Ninevah's not my department." With that, he takes off in the opposite direction, towards Tarshish. En route, the boat runs into a storm, and Jonah has his fabled close encounter with the denizens of the deep.

After extracting Jonah from what looked like becoming a watery grave, the Lord tries again. "Get on your bike, Jonah," he says in the passage we heard this morning "Go to Ninevah, and proclaim the message that I give you".

Not wanting to push his luck again, Jonah obeys. Reluctantly, he goes and utters the warning of which he is the bearer. But this is where things get interesting. The prophet watches, surprised and resentful, as the Ninevah lot actually heed his warning, repent as directed and thus avert the divine displeasure that was threatening to overwhelm them.

He has succeeded. But notwithstanding his success – indeed, precisely because of his success –Jonah is left a very unhappy little prophet.

Why? What is going on in this strange vignette?

Jonah, our eccentric and disobedient man of God, is really a caricature of the attitudes and piety of his day. The Jewish people had come to think of themselves as more important than anyone else. Other nations were inferior, beyond the pale, cut off from God's mercy and care. Religion like everything else had become introverted, self-centred. Ninevah? Who gives a damn about Ninevah? Not us. And not our God either. Let them stew in their own juice. Let them suffer for their own sins.

It was an understandable reaction, perhaps, from people who had suffered through the long, hard years of the exile. When the going gets tough it seems natural to be preoccupied with the in-group – one's family, one's country, one's race, one's ... whatever – to the detriment of whoever that leaves as the out-group. Bigotry thrives in hard times. We've seen it happen, here in Australia, in years gone by.

Jonah personifies this introversion of a people. He is narrow-minded, exclusivist. He draws lines, defines limits, puts up barriers. He not only despises the Assyrians, but presumably all other non-Jews as well. He even conceives of the Almighty as the God of the Jews only, the God who cares not for the rest of creation.

But the writer of this story turns those comfortable prejudices upside down. With a fine touch of irony he makes Jonah the unwilling cause of the salvation of the very people the prophet despises.

What we have in the book of Jonah, then, is a wonderfully human saga showing the universal, all-inclusive love of God asserting itself over against the perennial human temptation to settle for a narrow, exclusivist, in-group versus out-group view of the world. Divine caring, it says, embraces all, without discrimination, and we'd better make sure our caring does likewise.

Tomorrow is Australia Day. Flags will fly. New citizens will be welcomed, Speeches will be made. Ferries will race. Television will feed us the usual platitudes. National modesty will bite the dust, as people who've never been anywhere else declare this to be the best country in the world. All great fun. All very sweet and comforting, and just possibly at moments even inspiring.

But those of us who hold the Christian faith would do well to reflect on the Jonah drama and how it points us – and our nation – to something of crucial importance.

Yes, the country faces many tasks, many challenges. But none is more important at this point in our history than the need to make this a land in which all are respected and none is treated with contempt. A land in which barriers between people are being broken down, not reconstructed. A land in which the all-inclusive mercy and caring of God is reflected in the all-embracing mutual respect and caring of its people.

Australians like to tell themselves what a wonderful country this is. And, for many of us, that's true. But not for all. Not for the poor, with the prospect becoming poorer while the rich keep getting richer. Not for the young or for generations to come, who will be stuck with the consequences of our reluctance to act effectively on global warming and renewable energy. Not for our indigenous compatriots, trapped at the bottom of every social indicator. Not for our neighbours in developing countries, as they watch the help they get from Australia dwindling. A wonderful country?

It's easy to blame the politicians for our policy shortcomings. But who elects the politicians? People's votes too often are determined by self-interest, narrowly understood. The question in our minds as we line up to cast our ballots, in our regular dates with democracy, should not be: what's in a particular party's policies for me and people like me. It should be: what is best for the country, the human race, indeed creation as a whole. In-group versus out-group thinking must go.

That requires conversion, nothing less. The transformation of hearts and minds. Not just "there" – at Parliament House, Canberra. Or "there" – in the famous Bear Pit. But "here," in the hearts and minds of all.

Every so often, something erupts to shatter our complacency.

Back in 1989, some of us in Sydney formed an informal coalition of individuals and NGOs called CAARV -- the Community Alert Against Racism and Violence. It was in response to a nasty far-right group called National Action which had been attacking property, trying to intimidate the community into silence while they set about promoting hatred of Asians, Jews, Aboriginal people, gays and lesbians, and migrants in general. All of which meant they didn't like the Uniting Church very much either! Our Pitt Street church in particular was targeted, its courageous minister burned in effigy on her front lawn. That particular outburst of thuggery passed, but there have been others since and no doubt there are more to come.

It is important to recognise that we live on the brink.

Let me say again. The problem is not simply "up there," among our parliamentary decision-makers. Nor is simply "out there," among others in the community. It is "in here".

A potential Jonah lurks within each and every human being.

Recognising that can be painful. Some years ago I unearthed a diary I'd kept while on a geology expedition west of Broken Hill. It took place long ago, during my last year of high school. Ancient memories were reawakened. But my eyes burned with shame and embarrassment when I read young David Gill's contemptuous remarks about "the Abos" he'd encountered along the track.

It was racism, pure and simple. Self-condemned, in my very own handwriting. Jonah would have been proud of me. But, even all these years later, I find it hard to be proud of myself.

If our personal histories have elements that make us squirm, so too has our history as a nation. You know the story. With that corporate history too we must come to terms. I'm not talking about a sanitised version of the past carefully trimmed to sit comfortably with how mainstream Australia would like to see itself. I'm talking about a version that acknowledges the story, warts and all, as it really was.

God willing, such acknowledgement will lead us as a nation to discover what the Christian gospel suggests is the ever-present possibility of forgiveness and new beginnings.

That possibility of new beginnings must surely be the galvanising hope for all our people.

Tim Winton, in his novel *The Riders*, has a wonderful passage in which his lead character, an Australian, is contemplating the countryside of Ireland. "It was a small, tooled, and cross-hatched country," he muses. "Every field had a name, every path a style. Everything imaginable had been done or tried out there." But his homeland, he remembers, felt different. "In Australia you looked out and saw the possible, the spaces, the maybes".

Other countries may have long histories behind them. Modern Australia's has barely begun. The national identities of others may be set in concrete. Ours continues to evolve. Those dramatic possibilities, those spaces, those maybes, combine to make Australia an extraordinarily exciting nation to be part of right now.

This country deserves the very best that you and I can give to it. Not just because of what it is, but more because of what it could become.

Tomorrow, as people throng to the city for another Australia Day, St Stephen's will be its usual hive of activity. Here, at the heart of historic Macquarie Street, lots of good things will be happening. And that's great.

But remember, the best gift we in the churches can offer this nation is a clear, consistent, courageous witness to the One whose love embraces all our people, whose mercy encompasses all our sins and whose grace overarches all our years.

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