

Free gift of life

Many people have heard of Jonah, if you mention his name someone is bound to remember that he was swallowed by a whale, though the Bible doesn't actually say that it says a big fish but let's not split hairs. Not many people however will know the how and the why

Jonah was a prophet, a person chosen by God to speak for Him, and God gave Jonah a very simple job, 'go to Ninevah and announce my judgement on them'.

Ninevah was a city to the northeast of Israel that would require an overland trip and by all accounts Ninevah was a wicked city. We are not told the nature of their wickedness, we do not know what they did to displease God, but whatever it was it would appear not to have been a secret.

Jonah knew of their wickedness so that when God told him, 'go and tell them my judgement', he did what any sensible person would do. He found a boat that was going in the opposite direction, to Tarshish which many will equate with Spain, and got on it as fast as he could.

But of course he couldn't run away from God and when a big storm threatened the boat Jonah owned up, that God was really after him, and asked the sailors to throw him into the sea to save them selves. And this is where the big fish comes in and swallows Jonah until he agrees to do what God has told him to do.

So the fish spits Jonah out, and God tells Jonah once more what he has do to, go to Ninevah and proclaim the message that I will tell you, and off Jonah goes.

The Bible tells us that Ninevah was a great city, so large it would take three days to walk across. We know from archaeological digs that it's walled enclosure had a circumference of eighty miles, so the three days obviously encompassed it's outer suburbs, and in today's passage we read it had more than 120,000 inhabitants. When Jonah got there he walked one day into it, and he probably hadn't reached the city walls, and he cried out God's message, 'Forty more days and Ninevah shall be overthrown'.

Again we don't know the nature of the calamity that was about to overtake Ninevah, but Jonah's words struck a chord, people listened to him, and we read they responded in a dramatic manner.

Jonah's sermon could probably make it into the Guinness book of records as the most effective sermon in history. His message was 'Forty more days and Ninevah shall be overthrown', eight simple words and 120,000 people changed their ways and turned to God.

And in today's passage we read that Jonah was not happy, he would have preferred God to destroy Ninevah. So that we are left with the impression that his initial reluctance to go to Ninevah did not stem from fear, but from a desire that they should get what they deserved.

The story of Jonah, and the parable that we read in the gospel of Matthew, both speak of the extent and nature of God's grace, and God's desire to forgive and restore humanity to Himself.

Though the nature of the wickedness of the city of Ninevah is not defined the root of all wickedness is sin. Sin is such a small word, but it covers such a multitude of things in life.

Of course we use the word sin in Spanish, and in Spanish it means without, or the absence of. So sin alcohol means without alcohol, sin aditivos means without additives, etc.

And in a sense the use of the word in the English context also carries this sense of without, in this case without God, without God's righteousness, without God's justice, without God's mercy. It isn't so much a question of the breaking of rules and regulations, as it is about missing the mark, about being less than we should be, about falling short of the glory of God.

Too often we have reduced sin to the presence of wrongful actions, when in reality it is absence of mutual love and relationship. When Jesus was asked to say which was the most important commandment, he immediately responded, 'You must love the LORD your God

with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: Love your neighbour as yourself.' Jesus went on to say, 'The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.'

If we think and analyse it, we now it's true, even from the narrow perspective of the ten commandments, love of God and neighbour covers it all. So that sin, from that context is the absence of love. Without love of God, without love of neighbour, we are in sin, so that from that perspective none of us can say 'we have not sinned'. We know that at times, in fact many times, we fail to love both God and neighbour, as we should.

So that the apostle Paul was quite entitled to write, in his letter to the Romans, 'For everyone has sinned' (Romans 3:23 NLT). We all fall short of God's glorious standard. We don't need to be mass murderers, we don't need to be utterly depraved, or evil, or rebellious. We fall short of God's glorious standard and that is sin, the absence of His love and His grace. And that the apostle Paul reminds us only leads one way, later on in his letter to the Romans we read, 'the wages of sin is death,' (Romans 6:23 NLT). We know we all have to die, it is part of the human condition, but Paul is talking about something beyond that, not the death of the body, but the death of the soul.

The Ninevites were in the first instance threatened with extinction, but that was only the first death, they must have seen beyond that to the second death.

Jesus speaks clearly about the reality, and the presence of hell, and none of us want to go there, which is why I am constantly thankful that Paul does not end his sentence there, he goes on to say 'but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Free gift, we like those words when it comes to a marketing promotion, 'buy this and we will give you this free gift', which really means, 'we have already included the cost of the 'free gift' in the price of what you are buying'.

But this free gift is different, we don't need to buy anything, all we need to do is accept it. God has seen our condition, God shows His grace by saying, 'I am not really concerned with how much you've done, I am not concerned with how much you haven't done, I am prepared to cover it all, and give you the full free gift of life, because I love you'.

It is the reason why Jesus came, and died on a cross, that we might be spared death, just like the people of Ninevah, and might have life

We know from the story of Jonah that all it took for Ninevah to be spared was an acknowledgment of their sin and repentance, a turning away from that sin. We know how weak we are, how we keep failing time and again, and we can often be tempted to think, 'what's the use? We've been this way all our lives, we can't change'. And of course we can't, but God can change us, and God will change us if we turn to Him.

It doesn't matter whether it's the morning of our lives, or the afternoon, or the evening, God can still change us, and wants to give us the fullness of the free gift of life. All we need to do is be willing to accept it

The people in the parable who worked an hour, and got paid for the full day, could have turned round and said 'we don't deserve this, we haven't earned it'. We can sometimes do the same with God's gift, we can turn to Him and say, 'we don't deserve this, we haven't earned it' which of course is perfectly true.

God today says to us, 'you don't have to, it's my free gift of love to you, take it, accept it, enjoy it, and be with me in eternity.

There may be someone here today, or listening at home, who would like to accept this gift. If there is, in a moment I am going to say a prayer and I would invite you to repeat it after me. Jesus died to set us free from sin accept His free gift today.

God, I know that I am a sinner. I know I have done things which you have not liked, and missed the mark you have set for me, by being without love in my life. I know that I deserve the consequences of my sin. But I am trusting in Your love and grace and in what You have done for me in Jesus Christ. I want to accept that free gift of life today. I believe that Jesus' death and resurrection provided for my forgiveness. I

trust in Jesus and Jesus alone as my personal Lord and Saviour. Thank you Lord, for saving me and forgiving me! Amen!"