**19th June 2016**

**Jonah**

There is a lot of angry people in the world.

Last week was the story of the killing of 50 people in a Gay Night Club in Orlando by Omar Mateen. He claimed the killing in the name of Islamic State and he was known by former colleagues as a person who had a lot of hatred particularly towards gay people. There have been suspicions that the Orlando shooter was uncomfortable with his sexual orientation which may have led to the massacre. Apparently he had frequented the gay night club many times himself and the suggestion is that this homophobic man was deep down hating himself.

A few days ago the MP for Batley and Spen, Jo Cox was shot and stabbed to death at her constituency office. Nick Robinson wrote:

*She was vulnerable to attack because she was, like so many MPs, available to anyone who wanted to see her with any grievance.*

*Her death is a reminder that our elected representatives, who are so often demonised for living separate lives from the rest of us, actually all too often live in our communities, in our streets worrying about the same things that we do.  Unlike us, though, they open themselves up not just to criticism and abuse but to assault by those who disagree with them.*

Her husband Brendon said: *She would have wanted two things above all else to happen now, one that our precious children are bathed in love and two, that we all unite to fight against the hatred that killed her."*

*Jo Cox had been an advocate of compassion towards immigrants especially refugees from Syria. Her killer was heard to attack her shouting Britain First, Britain first. Appearing before Magistrates yesterday he said his name was ‘Death to traitors, Freedom to Britain’*

The killing comes as we enter the final week of campaigning on the EU Referendum: a campaign that has been criticised even before the killing of Jo Cox for creating a climate of hatred, negativity and cynicism. It has depicted politicians as only in it for themselves; there has been a growing hysteria towards foreigners, especially immigrants; and the Referendum has been portrayed as an opportunity to kick the Westminster elite.

There are a lot of angry people in the world. Whatever you vote this week in the EU Referendum let not your vote be motivated by hatred. That destructive emotion is never a firm basis nor a Christian basis for making any decision.

In our Bible story today Jonah is an angry man. He expects God to be angry too but when God forgives and shows how gracious He is Jonah gets angry with God. So God challenges Jonah: ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’

Jonah is one of my favourite books in the Bible. There is nothing quite like it in scripture. The other stories about the prophets tend to portray them as great heroes. They are courageous men and women – people who see things as God sees them, and who speak the truth even when that puts their own lives at risk. Their task is to challenge the people of God to live like people of God, to be loyal to God and to be just and kind in their dealings with one another.

Jonah, however, gives God a very hard time. God tells him to speak not to the people of Israel or Judah, as we would expect, but to the inhabitants of the foreign city of Nineveh. And when finally he gets there and opens his mouth, he says very little, and it’s not clear that it’s what God wanted him to say either.

In stories about the great prophets such as Elijah, Amos or Jeremiah, people often take little heed of what they say. The people of Nineveh, however, immediately take notice of Jonah’s few words and act upon them. And when God forgives them it drives Jonah mad!

We don’t know anything about who wrote the story or when it was written. On one level it’s amusing and hilarious, full of all sorts of wonderful and impossible things. Don’t get hung up about whether it actually happened or not. It’s a story, first and foremost, written to make us think and use our imagination to ponder some big issues.

In the end it’s a story about the forgiveness of God, and how far that goes. It’s only short but its one of the most profound and challenging stories in the Bible.

Some thoughts and reflections and questions from the book of Jonah:

Jonah is a book of irony. It centres on a prophet who, although he believes in the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land, believes that he can escape from God and God’s commission. Do we, whilst believing in God, sometimes act as if God wasn’t there? Do we try our best to avoid what we know we should be doing, what deep down will give us joy and life?

As a young man I was quite idealistic and thought that God had called me to inner city ministry. That is why I went to train in Manchester and some of the roughest parts of that city in the 1990s. My first church was in the city sized town of Warrington in a mixed urban context. I moved here to Dursley out of convenience so we could be near grandparents as we were expecting our third child and finding the need for some parental support. I came here feeling as though I was betraying my calling. I came with a heavy heart. Yet on the Sunday before I left Warrington I was preaching on Psalm 23 and the verse ‘He will lead you to green pastures’ stood out for me. I have certainly felt blessed to have been the minister of this church for the last 15 years despite initially feeling that I was betraying my calling in coming here in the first place..

Do you believe God has a call on your life? Will we miss it? Will we evade it? God may well call someone else instead. Or God may pursue us to get us to change our minds and our direction. Sometimes you can get away from God’s call; sometimes you can’t.

I was only at the church in Warrington for just over five years but during that time three people felt called to the Christian ministry of Word and Sacraments. I have been here fifteen years and not one person has felt called. I kind of wonder if I’m doing something wrong? I am praying, as I hope you are too, that God calls people to ministry in his church. We are desperate for gifted motivated individuals with a heart for God’s work.

I kind of picture God rolling his eyes when Jonah was called to go to Nineveh and he fled in the opposite direction to Tarshish.

Jonah’s task, to go to the hated Assyrian city of Nineveh, seemed impossible and not at all attractive. Ninevah and the Assyrians had a fearful reputation of brutality and wickedness. Send me anywhere but there Lord! It is easy to feel called to the comfortable option.

A church warden arrived at the vicarage to keep his appointment with the vicar, but his teenage son answered the door. ‘I’m afraid he won’t be able to see you after all. He’s just received a letter offering him the post of Bishop to the Bahamas. He’ll get a free car, six weeks holiday and double the salary. So he’s gone up to his study to pray for guidance.’

The church warden enquired: ‘Is your mother praying with him?’

‘Oh No’ said the teenager, ‘she’s up in the bedroom packing the suitcases’.

It would be nice to be called to the Bahamas – but someone needs to be called to Dursley, to Britain, to the parts of our country where the gospel is not being shared, where the message of Jesus is not heard. Within the ministry of the church there are always less attractive jobs that need doing. Where are the Nineveh’s today? Is God calling you to go there?

Yet the second irony was that Nineveh did respond to the message, even more surprising when contrasted with the unwillingness or inability of the people of God to hear the warnings of their own prophets. In our own lives we may have to undertake unattractive tasks. Can we avoid negative preconceptions and be open to be surprised.

The story of Jonah suggests that if you are God’s mouthpiece and God is at work it doesn’t matter what is in your heart. This reluctant and angry person is used by God to bring a dramatic change to the Ninevites. It matters to you and your own relationship with God the state of your heart, but not in connection with what God achieves through you, which may be unrelated to what is in your heart. It’s a reason not to assume that a successful pastor is in close touch with God, and not to assume that an unsuccessful pastor has lost touch with God.

Jonah seems to have anticipated that things would turn out oddly, that God would show mercy and not judgment, and this deeply upsets him. Jonah doesn’t want judgement on the great Assyrian oppressor to be cancelled. The book of Obadiah follows on nicely from the book of Amos in the Bible. Then Jonah follows on from Obadiah. Obadiah witnesses to God’s toughness, Jonah to God’s desire to show mercy. Just when the Israelites believe God is all about vengeance and wrath and anger, along comes the story of Jonah to reveal a God of compassion and mercy who can ‘change his mind’.

Here Jonah resembles people who like to feel that they alone belong to the elect, the chosen people, the true church etc. while everyone else is lost or damned. He resembles those who are distressed by the thought that other members of their family, or neighbours, or criminals, could truly turn to God. Such a reaction is natural and human, but betrays an inner insecurity, a desire to possess God for one’s own benefit, so that others become unwelcome competitors. Are we possessive about God, believing only we have the truth? Which people in our community have we given up on? Who do we find it hardest to love? Or forgive?

Jonah sulks and gets angry. He has been made to look a fool because Nineveh will not be destroyed. How often do we have a tantrum and go off in a sulk? I’m going out for a walk, down to the shed, off to the pub, round to a friend. Often we storm off when we don’t get our own way, or when we are in the wrong and don’t want to admit it. Or, like Jonah, our image is damaged. Can we take our anger to God? Can we be angry with God?

Jonah ends up in the belly of the whale twice in this story. The first time is obvious. He runs away from God. The big fish is God’s agent to make him come to his senses and get back on track. The second time is when Jonah is confronted by the real God of mercy and compassion. Once more Jonah can’t accept this God.

The metaphorical whale this time is the plant that shades him and the bug that eats the plant which then God uses to illustrates how God cares for all.

God has provided shade for Jonah but then adds insult to injury by letting the vine die as quickly as it grew. This act offends Jonah not only because he loses his shade but because he feels sorry for the plant. ‘Excuse me?’ says God. ‘You feel sorry for the plant? What about the people in Nineveh and for that matter the animals too?’ –who would have been implicated in the destruction.

The book ends with the question. It doesn’t tell us Jonah’s answer, but leaves us as readers to answer the question, because it is our answer, not Jonah’s that matters.

Except we are left wondering about Jonah’s response this time. Will he grow out of his limited view of God, as full of anger and vengeance and transform in his faith?

Sometimes there are places we must go which are dark, uncomfortable or painful - metaphorically speaking like the belly of a whale or the scorching sun without any shade. Yet those dark periods can be our teachers, they can transform us. We can avoid God, but God can be at work in that darkness, in that tension, that discomfort, that pain. Then and only then will we be spit on a new shore and understand our call.

Jonah is a parable about God’s grace and our moral anger. Jonah thinks the Ninevites need to be judged and punished yet at the merest whiff of remorse God lets them off. God is not moral in Jonah’s view. The Ninevites have sinned and deserve punishment.

Richard Holloway in his book Anger Sex Doubt and death writes:[[1]](#footnote-1)

‘It would be easy to get from certain themes in scripture a picture of an angry God who is constantly irritated by the children he has created. He is a God who intricately programmes his children with sexuality, but seems to hate sex. He is a God who is elusive and ungraspable in his essence and actions but appears to demand total faith in his own existence. He is a God who brings all to death, but appears to claim only some of them from everlasting torment. If this is our God, then our message is not good news. It may be urgent or important news we should share with others but it isn’t good news.

I don’t find that good news’, Holloway continues. ‘I am increasingly repelled by anger, particularly divine anger. I am tired by angry voices and clenched fists. I am tired of all those crowds we watch on television news, cursing their enemies, inflamed by their own self-righteousness. And I’m tired of my own anger, my irritation at frustrations to my own plans, my resistance to criticism, my defensiveness, my fear of being found out. The virtue I increasingly treasure and covet for myself is kindness, even kindness towards the brutal, because most of us are victims before we are oppressors.

Western Christianity has been relentlessly moralistic for centuries. It is the one reason why whole sections of society believe they are constitutionally incapable of church membership. They drink and smoke, they gamble and fornicate, they fiddle their taxes and steal from their work place, they don’t work very hard, they take it easy and are of easy virtue. They don’t feel comfortable in church, either socially or morally. They do not feel good enough. It’s an extraordinary reversal this, because these were precisely the people who hung around Jesus, the publicans and sinners who didn’t think they were good enough, and weren’t for the established religion of their day.

It is not a question of the kind of behaviour we think is right. Appropriate human behaviour is obviously fundamental to human happiness and flourishing and happiness and holiness are compatible. The issue is salvation: everlasting access to the love of God. The question is do sinners have that while they are still sinners, while they are still in their sins.

Paul writes in Romans 5: God demonstrates his own love for us: while we were still sinners Christ died for us.’

Christianity is good news – not good advice.’ The words of Richard Holloway.

Jonah found out that whilst God may be angry at wickedness God is not angry at humanity in themselves. God may hate the sin but love the sinner. God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

The question to Jonah is a question to us: Is it right for us to be angry?

In our anger may we discover grace. May the gracious loving God transform our anger.

1. Richard Holloway, Anger Sex Doubt and Death, SPCK 1992, Ch 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)