



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church January 25, 2015

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

The religious leaders came to Jesus and asked for a sign, "Show us that God is present in what you are doing". Jesus replied, "You will have no sign other than the sign of Jonah". And we are pretty sure that is an original saying of Jesus because Matthew and Luke disagree as what it meant.

Matthew points to the three days in the belly of the fish as a sign of the three days before the resurrection. Luke points to the power of the word of God, even on the lips of a reluctant preacher; Jonah, against his own judgement and feelings, went throughout the city saying, "In forty days, Ninevah will be overthrown", and the people heard him, repented and were saved. The people considered enemies heard the word of God and responded, that is the sign for the religious leaders who refuse to hear the word of God. And, as if to reinforce the point, Luke starts his version of the story with crowds gathering. The crowds of people that the religious leaders thought were enemies of God were listening and responding, while the people who should about the word of God were reluctant and asking for a special sign. This little parable like story of the prophet Jonah had become a timeless story of the power of the word of god to bring about the will of God. One sentence, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown", brings a whole city to its knees in repentance. Similarly, one sentence from Jesus, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people", and hardened fishermen are willing to forsake their livelihood and follow a strange wandering prophet. Now, while some might say that we are only being given a creative précis of the actual preaching, it still shows the power of the word of God. Targeted, simple words with deep meaning that touch something within people to bring forth a response. In that context, how can we go past Jesus declaration of the Gospel; "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news".

Scholars will tell you that these two verses – verse 14 and 15 – form an introduction to the ministry of Jesus in the first section of the book, and that it is a creative précis of the early ministry of Jesus – up to the great event of the transfiguration. I don't see a problem in that, but it isn't all that's happening here. This is Jesus preaching, this is the power of the word of God; just as Jonah's preaching was and just as Jesus message to Peter, Andrew, James and John was. Mark very quickly moves on from this preaching to show us Jesus the teacher and Jesus the healer and Jesus the miracle worker, and to say that those

aspects of the mission are what built the fame and drew the crowds. Indeed, the opening of the Gospel is that here is the Good News of Jesus, not the Good News that Jesus preached. I don't think there is that big a difference; Mark certainly didn't by including these words here. Here is the preaching that gets Jesus noticed and heard, the message that touches something within people and calls for a response; "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news".

The time is fulfilled. A few weeks back I talked of this idea that Jesus came in the 'fullness of time', but I think Mark wants us to see something else in Jesus words. In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, as the people are being expelled from the village at the end, one of the villagers asks the Rabbi if this wouldn't be a good time for the Messiah to come, in the midst of such suffering for the people of Israel. The excitement of the crowds responding to John's baptism, carries the same sentiment. After 400 years of prophetic silence, the sense of this passage is that the time of God's absence is fulfilled, now is the time for God to act, to come and to meet people in their suffering and their need. After John is arrested, Jesus comes preaching, "The time is fulfilled".

The kingdom of God has come near. It has been 600 years since the Israelites had a king, longer if you want a king who was faithful to God. Centuries of brutal foreign occupation made the people hunger for the justice, mercy and faithfulness of a kingdom of God. And to hear, not that it was a future vision or some sort of possibility that we could work towards, but that it 'had come near' was just the sort of simple message with deep meaning that could reach down into people and bring out a response. The wait is over, you didn't have to do anything, God has acted and the kingdom has come near. Jesus preached that, and then enacted it in healings and exorcisms. To a people constantly taught by the priests and rabbis that they had to act first and be perfect for God to come near, this was a radical and life giving message; grace, God has come!

Repent and believe the good news. This was a carry on of the message of John, but as a response to God, a consequence of what God has already done, not as a way to bring about God's blessing. Turn your life around to align with God and believe that this is because God has already graciously acted. "I believe the kingdom has come near, so I want to join in." That is the basis of the great crowds that followed Jesus – they heard him say that the kingdom has come near and they saw the effect of that in Jesus ministry and they wanted to be a part of it.

Rather than some conflict, or difference, between messenger and message, all of this applies equally as well to the later proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Risen Son of God, as it does to the arrival of Jesus in Galilee preaching, teaching, healing and working miracles. In Jesus, God has acted, the kingdom of God has come near; God has acted graciously and is calling for a response.

Jonah, the reluctant prophet, preached God's word and elicited a great response. Jesus preached what seems to be a simple word and elicited a great response. And we can say the same thing for Paul, Peter and on through the centuries where preachers have found the word that connects with people and elicits response. And the great responses come from words that mirror Jesus preaching – God has acted, has come near to you and your life and offers something better, respond and join in. Can we find the words today that can carry that message? And, more crucially, can we enact those words in how we live so that people can see the better way? Jonah's words carried power because a militaristic city feared being overthrown. Jesus words had power because the people had a religious history to give them context. Paul's words on the Areopagus had power because they spoke to philosophical people. Can we find the simple words that carry a deep meaning, relevant for this generation and culture? Words to connect with the isolation of the individual, the sense of meaninglessness in a rational scientific culture or the emptiness of consumerism and to say that, in that life, God has acted and come near and invites you to something better.

The word of God has the power to bring life and hope if we are faithful in speaking the words of God – the words of the wonderful graciousness of acting in and through Jesus Christ, who came near, lived our life and calls for response.