



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Are you more like Jonah, who was reluctant to do what God wanted,
or more like Peter, who was full of enthusiasm but rash?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of change and challenge,
from the earliest days of the Church,
you have called ordinary people like us
to make known the name of your Son,
Jesus Christ, throughout the world.
Thank you that your Holy Spirit is always at work,

and that you invite us to join in your mission,
bringing light and hope and life.

Inspire us to keep on following you,
now and every day, come what may.

Amen

Psalm 30 (based on StF 808)

I will exalt you, O Lord, because you have raised me up
and have not let my foes triumph over me.
O Lord my God, I cried out to you and you have healed me.
You brought me up, O Lord, from the dead;
**you restored me to life from among those
that go down to the pit.**

Sing to the Lord, you servants of his;
give thanks to his holy name.

For his wrath endures but the twinkling of an eye,
his favour for a lifetime.

**Heaviness may endure for a night,
but joy comes in the morning.**

In my prosperity I said, 'I shall never be moved.

You, Lord, of your goodness, made my hill so strong.'

Then you hid your face from me,

and I was utterly dismayed. To you, O Lord, I cried;

to the Lord I made my supplication:

'What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the Pit?

Will the dust praise you or declare your faithfulness?

'Hear, O Lord, and have mercy upon me;

O Lord, be my helper.'

You have turned my mourning into dancing;

you have put off my sackcloth

and girded me with gladness;

Therefore, my heart sings to you without ceasing;

O Lord my God, I will give you thanks for ever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus is good news for all people,
even though our lives are marred by sin,
as God is compassionate and faithful.
We offer our confession, trusting in God's love:

we have faltered – **instead of following you;**
we have hesitated – **instead of following you;**
we have resisted – **instead of following you;**
we have turned away – **instead of following you;**
we have ignored – **instead of following you.**

Have mercy on us;
forgive us, restore us, heal us,
and release us to follow you. **Amen**

Readings Jonah 3:1 – 10
 Mark 1:14 – 20

Sermon

When I was training to be a local preacher, I was given some advice about using the lectionary readings, those Bible passages selected and set out for each week. I was told that, if there are verses missed out, as was the case with our Jonah reading today, it's always worth trying to understand why. On inspection, I decided that it was a good idea for us to include verses six to nine of chapter three of this book, rather than dropping them like the lectionary suggested, because it brought an interesting question to mind.

Jonah is one of those books of the Bible that's hard to date with any great accuracy, and indeed the question of 'what type of book is this anyway?' is somewhat controversial. One commentary I read, by a guy called Daniel Arnold, was insistent that because it's in the Bible, it must be historical. Consequently, he goes to some lengths to find rational explanations for how the stranger aspects of the story might have occurred, such as its main protagonist spending three days in the belly of a big fish, or Nineveh actually having been several times smaller than described, and so forth. Another commentary, this time by Robert Alter, was equally insistent that Jonah is a satirical piece, designed through its use of exaggeration, ironic humour and pathos to highlight a damaging nationalistic bias within Israel's religious life.

Having studied this book in some depth while at theological college, I've concluded that the second viewpoint makes much more sense, though of course, you are free to disagree with me! Whichever lens we look through, however, we're faced with one of those theological 'hot potatoes', which triggers equally strong views: can God change God's mind? Allow me to explain what I mean.

In verse nine, after ordering both the people and animals to call out to God and don sackcloth and ashes, the king of Nineveh says, 'who knows? God might have a change of mind!'. This echoes the earlier words of the captain of the boat in which Jonah was blissfully asleep as the storm raged around him. He angrily woke up Jonah, and told him to pray, so that the god responsible for the tempest might spare them (Jonah 1:6). Despite himself receiving mercy on that occasion, and being rescued from drowning by the intervention of the big fish, Jonah objects to an apparent divine change of mind when it applies to others. The essence of this story, then, is that the only successful Old Testament prophet (in the sense that the people listened to him) was furious at God for showing mercy to those he felt didn't deserve it, and much of the remainder of the book shows Jonah engaging in a profound and prolonged sulk!

Yet, perhaps, we cannot really blame him for feeling aggrieved. The first readers of Jonah would have known Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which dominated the Ancient Near East during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. They had destroyed Israel in the north, and reduced Judah, its southern neighbour, to just a remnant. Hence, the audience's image of Nineveh would've been pretty dark, to put it mildly, and I imagine that Jonah is depicted as running away primarily because he suspected that God would indeed show mercy towards his people's bitter enemies, and he did not want to play any part in their salvation. I imagine him being puzzled, wondering what on earth God was doing by failing to destroy Nineveh.

Interestingly, Jonah's story isn't the only instance in the Bible of God appearing to undertake an 'about-turn'. For instance, in Genesis 18, Abraham objected to God's plan to destroy the town of Sodom, and said, 'Surely there must be some good people in Sodom. The judge of the Earth must be fair to them, and can't just destroy the good on account of the bad'. God and Abraham then bargain over how many good folks are needed in order for God to spare that city. Even more poignantly, in chapter thirty-two of Exodus, Moses had been up the mountain receiving the commandments from God, whilst the people down at the bottom had been busily making a golden calf to worship instead. God threatened to destroy the people, and begin again with Moses alone, but Moses argued that God promised to be faithful to that stubborn and awkward group of people, and that if God was not going to keep this promise, then he didn't want to be spared either.

Now, as Rowan Williams argues, this isn't about God needing to be made to see sense by people. Instead, it is about God's persistence in the face of our muddles, messiness and failures. Hence, it shows what it actually means to refer to God as 'almighty'. God's power is simply "the unlimited power just to be there, to be faithful to, and for, a world that's deeply unstable and unjust". Thus, returning to Jonah for a second, it is God's almightiness that led to an unwillingness to

give up on Nineveh, and therefore, ironically, it's God's almightiness that was too much for Jonah. He wanted and expected God to share his prejudices, and to use divine power to destroy his enemies; thus, he was deeply angry about divine mercy prevailing instead.

So, what has all this got to do with us today? Well, I read Jonah not so much as an example of 'God changing God's mind', but more as an example of human beings encountering God's almightiness, and so needing to change our minds as a result. In this case, Jonah was challenged to mend his attitude towards the people of Nineveh, and accept that God was concerned for them, as much as for the people of Israel. As I look at the world around me, one thing which seriously concerns me is just how polarised we seem to be becoming and not just in terms of online discourse. The situation in America is just one example of how deep divisions are being played upon right now and it seems that the vitriol which some people are willing to aim at those who disagree with them knows no bounds. In this worrying context, recognising all human beings as made in God's image and likeness ought to make us less inclined to write one another off, and more to seek genuine peace in our communities. In this sense, the churches have something really important to offer to the wider world.

Turning to our reading from Mark's Gospel, in which Jesus calls the earliest disciples and invites them to join him in fishing for people, it seems to me that grappling with this issue must also shape how we approach the subject of welcome and hospitality. The UK Methodist Church has invested a great deal of time, energy and resources into 'God for All', which is our mission and evangelism strategy. Right at the core of this is the theological conviction that all people are loved and valued by God as those made in the divine image, including the most marginalised and oppressed members of our society and even those we might instinctively fear or dislike. Yet, while this is easy to say, it is actually very hard to put into practice; as a former President of the Methodist Conference, Barbara Glasson, once said, including

those who have been excluded can be a difficult and delicate calling to act upon, as much as it is a key part of our discipleship. At a local level, do we want our churches to grow but only by attracting people who already look, think and act like us, or are we willing to take risks in embracing the diversity and variety of human beings?

Jonah's story reminds us that God's mercy is available to all people. Now, I'm not for one moment saying that we should not be standing up against injustices, or that safeguarding and good boundaries are unimportant, because clearly they are vital in building the Kingdom. I am saying that automatically writing people off isn't part of the plan, whether it is those with worldly power at one end of the spectrum or those without a voice at the other. If we take Jonah's story seriously, whatever our views on its historical accuracy, it demands this of us. With that in mind, let us pray:

God of change and challenge,
you call us to follow you into the new creation;
help us to see your kingdom changing us
and bringing life into our community and world,
both in those places that we happily embrace,
and those where we fear to tread. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing