

Sermon
25 January 2015
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Jonah 1:1-17

Mark 1:16-20

Have you ever heard the expression: You're a very small fish in a huge big pond?

I think that that is a very true expression – because that *is* what we are – small fish in a big pond. But so very often we think that we are big fish, actually, sometimes we think that we are the only fish in the pond – because we act as if no-one else matters!

And that's nothing new.

Look at Jonah. Jonah was a prophet of God. A prophet's job was to go tell people what God *told* him to tell them. So God sent Jonah off on a wee chore, but he didn't want to do it.

Why? Because he didn't like the people God sent him too. He was a very patriotic Israelite. A member of the people of God. And now God sent him to Nineveh – the capital of the kingdom of Assyria – to heathens, to people who didn't believe in God. And it was just against

his principles to talk to people like that. They were not like him, and he didn't want to do it.

So what does he do instead? He tries to run away from God. Now how silly is that?! Nobody can hide from God – and Jonah was soon to find that out...

The author of the book of Jonah describes Jonah's flee from God very cleverly. In those days they believed that God lived way up in the sky, in heaven – so Jonah was trying to go as far away from God as possible, so he went down, down, down:

- Instead of going to Nineveh, where he was sent, Jonah went in the *opposite direction*, to Tarshish.
- Then we read that he went *down* to Joppa, where he boarded a ship.
- You also go *down* from land to sea.
- Once on the ship, Jonah went *down* again, below deck, where he fell into a "*deep sleep*".

The storm that broke loose on the sea must have been *some* storm, because the sailors were used to storms at sea, but this time they were panicking. So they did what their custom was to do – they prayed to their gods to rescue them. But when that didn't seem to help they started praying to foreign gods beside their national ones – *anything* to save themselves.

And then it became clear that it was Jonah's God who caused the storm, who in the end turned out to be the only real God, the God who made the sea and the land.

- So they threw Jonah *down* into the sea.

So Jonah went down, down, down, as far away from God as he thought he possibly could. But there, in the deep dark ocean, God sent a fish to rescue Jonah. And there, deep under the ocean, in the belly of a fish, Jonah realised that it is impossible to run away from God, because he is everywhere.

We have to keep in mind that in those days people were very scared of the ocean. To them water symbolised everything that was wicked. So there, in the very last place you would expect God to be, God came close to Jonah and rescued him, because God had a job for him to do.

So even though physically Jonah was as far away from God as he thought he could be – at the *bottom* of the ocean, as opposed to high up in heaven; and in the *ocean*, where only evil things lived and no-one would expect to find God; and spiritually he was probably even further away from God – because he sinned in a big way – he deliberately disobeyed God and followed his own head – God still wanted to use him, because he was the best person for the job.

So God forgave him and gave him a second chance. And in the end the people of Nineveh, who were gentiles, repented straight away when Jonah brought the word of the Lord to them, which was a huge lesson to the Israelites, who were God's own people, but who didn't want to listen to him.

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God's got something in mind for each one of us to do – that's why he made us, because he wants to use us. And it would be better for us to

just listen to God and do what he says, than to try and run away from him.

Because if he wants us to do something, even if we don't *want* to, even if we think that we *can't*, he'll equip us to be able to do it... So why put up a fight and waste your own time? If God wants you to do something just go do it straight away, because one way or another, you will have to do it anyway. No matter where you go or try to hide, no matter how much you pretend that you couldn't be bothered, God knows what is going on in your head and in your heart. You can't hide from him...

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Since the time of Jonah a few things have changed. God sent Jesus to earth to save us all. *Jesus* was also hoping to change God's mind about what he had to do here on earth – three times he asked God to take this cup away from him – but God said “no” – he had to suffer so all of us could live.

And because of that God doesn't only live far away in heaven anymore, through his Spirit he is with all of us now, all the time.

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So what does he want *us* to do?

In the Gospel according to Mark we saw that Jesus called the 2 fishermen Simon and Andrew to follow him, so they could become fishers of men. And their reaction to Jesus' call was the complete opposite of Jonah's.

Jesus called them while they were busy working, but we read that: “At once they left their nets and followed him”. No hesitation, no questions asked. God called, they listened. Even though that would have huge implications for their day-to-day lives – they were venturing into the unknown and risked the possibility to be shunned by their families, but still they obeyed, because it was *Jesus* calling them. To them it would be an *honour* to serve God, no matter what the personal cost to them.

And they never looked back. Just the opportunity to be with Jesus was more than enough for them to make this choice worth their while.

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And today God still calls us to be fishers of people.

He wants us to use every single opportunity we get to tell people about him, to set an example of what a life of faith looks like, of showing others how meaningful it is to have God in your live.

It’s not a difficult job. We don’t have to take time off to do it – there, where we are busy with our everyday-lives, God wants to use us. It’s there where we are at work, in the communal dining room, at the shops, with our families, with our friends:

- where he wants us to really listen when someone talks to us,
- where he wants us to help if someone in need crosses our path,
- where he wants us to smile to strangers,
- to bite on our teeth before we say something rude,
- to not gossip,
- to forgive,
- to reach out,

- to make a plan.

Even when we don't want to. Even when we feel as if we are in emotional overload, as if we don't have enough time, as if we don't have enough energy. Even when we don't like the people we meet, even if we look at life from completely different angles.

Because life is not only about *us* and *our* worries and our needs. We are small fish in a big pond, and we need to remember that God loves every other fish in that pond just as much as he loves us.

So whether you feel close to God or far away from God this morning, remember that he has a plan for you. My advice would be to rather approach this like a Simon and an Andrew, and enjoy it from the start. But even if you approach it like a Jonah, you will eventually come to the realization that actually, God is amazing.

When you feel as if you are at the deep dark bottom of the sea, as if whatever's happened to you or the devastating news you got recently is going to be the end of you – he will send a “fish” to bring you back to shore – but not so you can lie on the beach and feel sorry for yourself, but so that you can go *do* what he made you for.

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256 years ago today Robert Burns was born. And still if you say “some hae meat and cannae eat” or “my love is like a red red rose” people all over Scotland will know that you are quoting *him*. If you say “for auld lang syne” people all over the world will know that you are quoting him.

We only have a limited time here on earth – let's make what we say and what we do count, that 256 years from now, or even 2056 years from now people will remember us too – not because we ran away from God and had to be swallowed by a big fish, but because our love for the people around us had a lasting effect, and was something that was passed on from generation to generation.

Because:

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?*

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and auld lang syne ?*

No, so:

*For auld lang syne, my jo,
for auld lang syne,
we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.*

Amen