

## **‘Surprised by Grace – A homily for the Third Sunday before Advent**

*Jonah 3.1-10*

*Mark 1.14-20*

The story of Jonah is one most of us know well. One of my favourite interpretations of it is by the artist Marc Chagall who created six wonderful sketches to accompany the book of Jonah. The first illustrates the scene in the book where Jonah sets out to run away from the Lord after hearing his call to preach to the wicked people of Ninevah. In the sketch we see Jonah’s face, looking up at us. It is a face full of anxiety and distress, wrinkled and open-mouthed. Here the prophet runs away from God’s call, plunging headlong into a dark and dangerous world, trying to hide from who he is meant to be. The next four sketches illustrate Jonah’s journey of self-discovery, first as he finds himself in the midst of the chaos and violence of the sea as he is thrown out of the boat on the way to Tarshish; and then further still into the belly of the fish as Jonah learns once more the depths to which God will descend in order to find and redeem him. The final image illustrates the scene we have before us today, where Jonah is given his task a second time: to ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ The artist shows Jonah striding confidently towards Nineveh with staff in hand, his face open and glowing. Above him the sun is smiling. Jonah has found his purpose in life, and he looks happy.

Chagall’s paintings are full of life and innocence, and a certain kind of joyfulness, re-creating for us the bible as a ‘picture-book,’ drawing us into its narratives with warmth and delight. But what are we to see in this wonderful biblical book of Jonah? Against Chagall I would want to suggest that Jonah’s obedience to the word of the Lord is joyful in this instance only because he thinks it carries a message of destruction to the great city of Nineveh. After all Nineveh was a city infamous in the Bible for its opposition to the people of God, its aggression and military might, as an embodiment of the chaotic forces that aligned against God and his people. But Jonah is yet to realise – even after all he has been

through – that the word of the Lord is a word first to himself, a word of undoing, forgiveness and re-creation, before it can ever be a word to another. This is a word that has pushed Jonah to extremes, to the furthest-most point of death and despair as he has been swallowed up first by the chaotic and violent waves of the sea, and then by a great sea-monster. It is in this overwhelming place that Jonah learns again to sing the song of faith, no wonder that Chagall draws the fish with a smiling face and imagines Jonah being carried along reclining on the fish's belly, almost as if sunbathing on a tropical holiday.

But even after being plunged into death and spat-out into resurrection life, even after the word of the Lord is given a second time and Jonah responds, striding off this time in the right direction towards Nineveh, even after all of this, the stubborn prophet fails to 'get it,' failing to understand what God is all about, and what the prophetic call is all about. He's just like the people of Israel, who after the dramatic events of the Exodus, where God himself leads them through the swirling waters of chaos and death out of slavery and into freedom, then spend the next forty years wandering around in confusion and bitterness, wishing they'd been left in their comforting slavery. And he's pretty much like us, reluctant to hear anything new from the Lord, preferring to remain in our own narratives of bitterness, unforgiveness, smallness and pride.

But despite Jonah's smallness, a radically unexpected thing now happens. Jonah delivers his message and the hated godless city does what? Burns in sulphurous judgement? No. Ridicules and rejects the prophet? No. Rather, the citizens of Nineveh immediately believe. Just like the disciples in today's Gospel who respond to Jesus' 'sound-bite sermon,' 'and immediately leave their nets and follow him,' this apparently godless people spontaneously repent. It is a moment of pure gospel.

What is incredible in this narrative is that the prophet – the ultimate insider – gets it spectacularly wrong, lost in his own self-righteousness and self-satisfaction; and the people of Nineveh – total strangers and outsiders – get it straight away. The one who should know what the word of the Lord really means fails to understand it, and those foreign to that

word, respond to it with openness and grace. And the picture of God is no less radical. The God of Israel is no tribal God delighting in the destruction of his enemies, but a God of patience and generosity concerned with all, proclaiming a word of grace and inclusion to everyone, both near and far.

And where are we in all of this? The story of Jonah is, in the end, the story of us all. Like Jonah we are called to descend into the chaotic waters of baptism, to die to our own sense of self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, and to let go of the need to control and direct our own lives; like Jonah we are to be spat-back out into our world as a resurrection people, proclaiming a word of transforming and healing grace to the far corners of our world; and like Jonah we are called to a certain sense of surprise in a God who's forgiveness far outstrips our capacity to even imagine it, and who's radical inclusivity outsmarts our every exclusion. AMEN.