

God's mission field

Jonah 3: 1-10

"The Lord spoke His word to Jonah again and said, " Get up, go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to it what I tell you to say."

So Jonah obeyed the Lord and got up and went to Nineveh. It was a very large city; just to walk across it took a person three days. After Jonah had entered the city and walked for one day, he preached to the people, saying, " After forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed!"

The people of Nineveh believed God. They announced that they would stop eating for a while and they put on rough cloth to show their sadness. All the people in the city did this, from the most important to the least important.

When the king of Nineveh heard this news, he got up from his throne, took off his robe, and covered himself with rough cloth and sat in ashes to show how upset he was. He sent this announcement throughout Nineveh:

By command of the king and his important men: No person or animal, herd or flock, will be allowed to taste anything. Do not let them eat food or drink water. But every person and animal should be covered with rough cloth, and people should cry loudly to God. Everyone must turn away from evil living and stop doing harm all the time. Who knows? Maybe God will change His mind. Maybe He will stop being angry, and then we will not die.

When God saw what the people did, that they had stopped doing evil, He changed His mind and did not do what He had warned. He did not punish them."

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Sometimes God wants us to do things for him that we do not particularly relish.

To put the above scripture into context, God had told Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn them of His coming judgement upon them. Jonah who hated the Ninevites for what they had done to his people did not want to, fearing that they would repent and God would relent so he ran away.

The story is well known; Jonah ran to Joppa to catch a ship to Tarshish to run away from God. God, however, caused a huge storm such that the boat was in danger of sinking. Jonah had told the crew he was running from God and told them to throw him overboard and the sea would calm down. At first they tried to row the boat to safety but when they saw this was useless, reluctantly they did as Jonah asked and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea became calm again (and as a by product of Jonah's rebellion against God the crew all turned to God in repentance.)

Jonah was swallowed by a large fish where he remained for three days and nights and whilst there prayed to God, promising to praise and thank him and keep his promises to him. God then commanded the fish to disgorge Jonah onto dry land.

There then follows the above scripture where we see Jonah finally obeying God's command to him after realising he had nowhere to run to.

So what can we learn from this?

As we move into 2019, a year when changes will happen in NCF as John moves into his ministry of leading the church next week and starts to bring about the vision which God has laid on his heart for NCF for the next few years we as a congregation need to pray for, support, love and nurture both John and Gill. It is important for us to realise as John pointed out last week that this is not about John listening to God and putting in place what he believes God is saying, although of course that is an important part of his ministry, but he needs us to work alongside and support him, to encourage him, to feed into him anything we believe God is saying to us about the future of NCF for him to weigh.

It will not always be easy but as we are exhorted in Hebrews 13:17 in the Amplified version:

"Obey your spiritual leaders and submit to them recognising their authority over you, for they are keeping watch over your souls and continually guarding your spiritual welfare as those who will give an account of their stewardship of you. Let them do this with joy and not with grief and groans, for this would be of no benefit to you."

John will have to give an account of his stewardship of NCF in due course just as Nik and I will and part of our responsibility to him is to make his task a joyful one and not one that causes him grief. That's not to say we can't have a different point of view and express it, but to do so in grace and love and submission to his God given authority knowing that he will ultimately account to God for his decisions.

I know that one of the things on John's heart is mission to those around us, both on this existing estate and on the new estates which are springing up around us. Part of our responsibility is to prepare ourselves as God's people to serve God and John as he envisions that.

Not me you might be saying, I'm not good enough, I haven't got the right gifting, I'm not ready.

Let me say firstly and perhaps most importantly, God uses flawed people who are still very much in the process of maturing. That, I would suggest, is every one of us. So if you feel that you are not good enough yet to be used by God, you are probably right, but God wants to use you anyway! The Bible is littered with examples of people who shrank back from their calling because they felt inadequate; Moses with his stammering lips and Jeremiah, who felt like a child doing a man's work are just two examples. Yet both were effective in the work God called them to because those whom God calls He also equips.

Mission, reaching out to those around us as God directs, is about the mobilisation, not of highly trained presenters, but of profoundly ordinary, works in progress people like us.

Henry Beecher once said: “ The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones.” If you are feeling inadequate to be used by God then join the rest of us!

IN our own strength we will never be ready to be used by God but if we submit ourselves to Him and allow Him in His strength to develop our giftings and talents then in our weakness He is strong and will provide everything we need for us to use those giftings to advance His kingdom here on this estate and wherever He wants us too. We just need to trust Him and obey His leading.

Secondly we need to go out and get them. As most of you know, I used to spend most of my days off fishing with my son, Anthony, unfortunately due to my recurring cellulites, on doctors orders, I can no longer do it. But the one thing we did not do is lay out the landing net on the bank and expect the fish to jump into it! Oh that I wish we could have sometimes! But no, we had to set up our tackle and spend time and effort in the hope of catching that elusive fish. Sometimes we even caught one or two and there is quite a thrill when you do, especially if it is a good sized one (use exaggerated hand gesture).

Similarly we as Christians can hope and pray that people will arrive in church on Sundays. But almost invariably God tells us, as he did Jonah, to go to the people and invite them in. Indeed statistics show that well over 70% of new people coming into church do so by personal invitation from a friend or neighbour. So we need to develop those relationships we have with non Christians and when the time is right, and God will guide you if you let him, as part of that friendship, not as a goal to be ticked off, but out of love and care for that individual, after all don't you owe it to them to give them an opportunity to hear the Good News and make a decision for themselves, the alternative is pretty dire! They can then decide which route they want to take.

We have spent time in 2018 praying on the streets of St Nicholas Park and on the new estates and I know that some of you do this on a regular basis individually as well and we soon hope to repeat this again. This involves us in time and commitment and an unconditional desire to get alongside people something we should be willing and eager to do if we are going to build God's kingdom. The Bible is littered with such stories, the Good Samaritan being perhaps the best known example. Are you prepared to extend the unconditional hand of Christian fellowship to those around you who do not know Christ?

Thirdly we need to accept those whom God brings us alongside.

You may recall the story I recounted, given to me by Phyllis of the pastor who sat outside his church disguised as a tramp and waited to see how the congregation reacted to him. And then walked into the church and sat alongside people to get their reaction before taking off his disguise and speaking to them about how God accepts everyone warts and all into his kingdom. How would we react if someone genuinely walked into NCF in similar circumstances?

If church has become a clique, a clan gathering of people of similar classes and backgrounds that are suddenly invaded by people of a different “ilk” then the unity of that church can be severely tested. We need to be aware of that and ensure that we maintain open minds and hearts to accept whoever God sends to us.

As we go out onto the streets as we have been doing and invite people to come to church it may well be that people we may not particularly like the look of will come through our doors in the future. Are we, as Jesus was, prepared to love the unlovely? How big is the heart of our church to love those around us, regardless of their background.

Fourthly, there are times when we need to share and speak out the good news of the Christian message to those around us. We need to be sure that it is what God is telling us to do and to do it with respect, tact and God given words. God’s message to Jonah was very clear: go to Nineveh and “proclaim to it the message I give you.”

If we are listening to Him in our daily lives and prayer times He will do the same for us and we will know in our spirit when to speak out effectively the good news He has given us and sometimes when to remain silent and wait for another time.

Finally we need to live out the message as well as speak it. it has been said several times in this church, if we talk the talk are we prepared to walk the walk?

St Francis of Assisi said: “ It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”

People need to see us living out our faith in our everyday lives. It's no good giving one impression on a Sunday and then living the rest of the week as citizens of the world. If we want to see people saved for god then they need to be able to see in us a difference from what they see in the rest of the world. God wants our total commitment not just a bit now and again. He knows however that we will fail and is prepared in His grace and mercy to work with us to slowly bring us to a better place where we can be more effective for Him.

Jeff Lucas once said; “ Years ago I used to tell people who weren’t Christians and accused the church of hypocrisy “Don’t look at the church, look at Jesus.” I now realise that I was very wrong. First of all, Jesus is invisible and therefore not easy to look at. (Good point!) Secondly the church has been created as a working model of kingdom life. God wants people to be able to look at us and see Jesus.”

Let me repeat that God wants people to be able to look at us and see Jesus.

Quite a responsibility! Are we up to the task?

Let us pray

Father in this Christian walk of ours you never said that we would be spared the hurt and pain of everyday life. You did however promise that You would be there beside us in those times. Father as we live our lives for You help us to shine as beacons for You in this dark world. Help us to hear Your voice when You call us to go, and Father, if we run away the first time You call, please call us again as You did Jonah and give us Your strength to be obedient to that calling. As Your church here on this estate, Lord, please help us to live our lives as a church and individuals so that when people come in for the first time they will be able to say: "Surely God is in this place."

In Jesus name we ask it. AMEN