

## **Message for January 24, 2021**

**Jonah 3:1 – 4:1**

**Mark 10:13-16**

In the days following the mayhem at the American Capital Hill, an article appeared online written by a prominent American evangelical. It was written for his fellow evangelicals and in it he noted that during the past four years the majority of those American Christians who identify themselves as being evangelical had wholeheartedly supported Donald Trump even though his policies, statements, and actions were the exact opposite of everything that Jesus had ever taught. There were many reasons for this but the author, who was a former Trump supporter, argued that their unqualified support of Trump had and would continue to harm Christianity and especially those denominations and churches that identify themselves as evangelical. One of the great goals of evangelical Christianity is to attract people to Christ and his church. By their support of Trump however, the evangelicals had achieved the exact opposite. So many people today look at Christianity and decide that if this is what it is all about, bigotry, greed, immorality and disrespect for others, then they don't want any part of it. The writer concluded that American evangelicals, without ever realizing it, have lost their way and need to take a long hard look at what they really believe in and stand for. In so far as this is true though, there is nothing new in this. Indeed, one might say that the religious authorities at the time of today's first scripture lesson had, with the best of intentions, also lost their way.

The Babylonian exile had ended and God's people had returned home to Israel. While they had been gone other people had moved there and so when the Jews returned, they had to get along with these 'newcomers'. There were tensions to be sure but human nature being what it is, young men and women from the different ethnic and religious groups met, fell in love, got married and had families. Now this horrified some of the Jewish religious and political leaders. It did because they feared that if this continued then they, God's people, would be assimilated and perhaps even disappear! The authorities then came up with a simple enough solution – get rid of all the 'foreigners'! Every effort was made to encourage them to leave. Intermarriage was forbidden and a law was

even passed that tried to force all Jews to divorce their non-Jewish spouses. The official view was that Israel was for the Jews and only the Jews! From this it was just one short step to start despising the 'foreigners' and to start believing that God did so too. At the same time though there was also another more tolerant tradition in Judaism that said that the 'outsiders' should be brought in rather than driven out. This more tolerant view was expressed in the ancient story of the prophet Jonah.

According to this old story, God told Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh and warn the inhabitants that if they did not repent and mend their ways, then God would destroy the city. Jonah however didn't want to go and tried to get out of the mission. Nineveh lay to the east of where he was and so Jonah promptly boarded the first ship heading west. Unimpressed by Jonah's disobedience, God caused a tremendous storm to spring up that threatened to sink the ship. When the sailors realized that Jonah was the cause of the storm, they reluctantly threw him overboard. Now this of course should have been the end of Jonah but it wasn't. According to the story he was swallowed by a great fish and, after spending three days in its gullet, was released. He made his way to dry land and, overwhelmed by this experience set out to do what God had told him to do in the first place.

Jonah made his way to Nineveh and preached the shortest sermon possible telling the Ninevites that if they did not repent then God would destroy their city. Their response to his few words however was overwhelmingly favourable; everyone from the king right on down to the very cows repented! God then graciously decided to spare the city and so the mission was a resounding success! Was Jonah happy however? No, in fact he was absolutely furious! The sad truth was that Jonah, the man of God, would have much preferred to have been a failure and seen the city and all of its inhabitants destroyed than be a success and see it saved. God however wasn't yet finished with him.

Jonah became very hot while sitting out in the full glare of the sun, praying and hoping against hope that God would change his mind and destroy the city. God caused a plant to spring up to give him shade and quite predictably, Jonah felt very grateful. On the next day however, God sent a great worm to kill the

plant and so once again Jonah was exposed to the full glare of the sun. He mourned for the death of the plant but when he did so, God delivered his punchline pointing out the irony of it all. There was Jonah, the religious man of God feeling so sad because of the death of a plant, all the while hoping and praying for the deaths of thousands of people simply because they did not belong to his own religious and ethnic group! If Jonah could take pity on a plant then why couldn't God take pity on an entire city, even if the people weren't Jewish and so a part of his chosen people? The truth is that God loved and cared about all his children no matter who they were.

So goes the ancient story of Jonah, the man whom I like to think of as being a successful failure; he was a success as a prophet and yet as a human being? He was an absolute failure. If it wasn't so sad it would almost be funny. The moral of the story though is simple enough; don't be like Jonah. God knows, cares about and loves all of his children and the challenge of the story is to broaden our own understanding of God's love, mercy and compassion, and by implication our own as well. We are to try and include others rather than exclude them, to try and bring people in rather than drive them out. This in fact is also the theme of today's second scripture passage.

We usually think of the episode of Jesus and the children as being so sweet and sentimental. In the words of a hymn of years gone by:

“When mothers of Salem their children brought to Jesus,  
The stern disciples drove them back and bade them to depart;  
But Jesus saw them ere they fled, and sweetly smiled and kindly said,  
‘Suffer little children to come unto me’.”

Contrary to the way we usually envision this episode though it was not all sweet and sentimental. Indeed have you ever wondered why those stern disciples even sought to drive the children away in the first place?

It wasn't because the disciples were mean or uncaring people. Rather it was because they unthinkingly embraced the social values of their time. Back then children simply did not count. Unlike us where our lives often revolve around our children and grandchildren, in that society at that time children had little power or importance. By welcoming them though and by taking them on his

knee and blessing them, Jesus made it clear that they did matter. In effect Jesus did what the story of Jonah challenges us to do, to expand the parameters. He challenged his disciples and by implication us too, to think about the scope of God's love, mercy, and compassion, to include rather than exclude.

The truth is that God's love, mercy, and compassion exceeds all our human understanding and we should never forget this. It is natural that when we disagree with others we think that we are right and that they are wrong. We may even think that our beliefs, lifestyle or whatever else are closer to God and his ways than those of others. And perhaps they are too but we go too far if we think that God only cares about us and doesn't care about them, whomever they may be. If we do not love, respect others, their feelings and dignity then we've missed the point of what the church, religion and even life itself are all about. Perhaps St. Paul said it best:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."

In short, if we do not love then it doesn't matter how right we are, how good we are or how religious we are. If we do not love and try our best to include rather than exclude then we, like Jonah before us, are in danger of being nothing more than successful failures.