



their sinfulness. Miraculously, the king and citizens of the city hear the proclamation and repent. In this ancient text, not only do the king and people of Nineveh repent, turn around their lifestyle, but God too repents: God does not punish and destroy the city and its inhabitants as God had promised. Let me take a few moments to reflect on this ancient and curious narrative: what does it mean?

The Book of Jonah opens with a call by God, by the LORD, to 'Go at once to Nineveh'. On hearing this call, Jonah immediately gets up and heads in the opposite direction to Tarshish. Jonah sought to escape the presence of the LORD. Jonah boarded a boat, paid his fare, and set out for Tarshish so that he may be 'away from the presence of the LORD'. Once out at sea, a tempest, a great wind is hurled on the sea and the mariners are quickly afraid and fearful for their lives. Each cried to their own god, while Jonah went down into the hold of the ship, lay down and fell asleep. As the drama develops, the sailors throw much of their cargo overboard to save the ship. Finally, they confront Jonah: 'What is your occupation? What is your country? Of what people are you?' Jonah replies, 'I am a Hebrew. I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' It is not long before the sailors decide to throw Jonah

overboard. Jonah is thrown into the fierce storm, the raging waves. As the sea calms, Jonah is swallowed by a large fish, a whale, a sea monster, and in its belly Jonah stays for three days and three nights. What are we to make of this incredibly colourful, imaginative piece of writing?

In the story we are told that Jonah does not want to go to Nineveh. It is not that he fears that the message of God, the call to repentance, will end in his death because the people will revolt and kill him. Jonah does not want to go to Nineveh because he suspects that the people will hear God's message, will repent and that God will let them live. It is God's message of grace and mercy, of One who is slow to anger and abounding in love which Jonah cannot face. Sometimes it is love we most fear; sometimes it is the love and forgiveness of another, we find most difficult to face. So it is with Jonah: Jonah is fearful of God's love. It terrifies him. Jonah dissolves at the thought of God's unconditional acceptance.

What does the story mean? The call, the dash to Tarshish, the boat, the tempestuous storm and the fish: what does it all mean? In Hebrew, the name Jonah is Yonah. The name Yonah means 'dove'.

In the Old Testament book, *The Song of Songs*, the Jewish people are the dove because the dove is faithful to its partner. In *The Song of Songs*, the Jewish people are God's lovers: they never leave God; they are Yonah. Yonah means dove: God's lovers. If we go one step further, in mystical Judaism, Yonah represents the soul, the soul which is a lover to the Sacred, to the Divine. The very name Jonah or Yonah suggests the soul as a lover of God.

There is a second and complementary meaning to dove, which is deception. The name Jonah suggests deception. By deception, it is not meant to suggest something sinister but rather that the soul lives on two levels: the superficial, surface level of life, the material and materialist level of life, but also at a deeper level, at the level of meaning and union with God. In a world of meaninglessness, the soul craves meaning, purpose, fulfillment and love. In the mystical tradition of Judaism, the boat is the body and it is only when the boat is about to break up and sink, when life at the superficial level no longer works, that the soul in this world is aroused into a new awareness, a more profound consciousness of the Eternal, is alive and acutely sensitive to the Mystery we call God.

Nineveh means two abodes: the body and the world. In life, the soul has to live life in the body and in the affairs of the world. I have lost count of the number of people who have entered a deeper awareness of the spiritual, of the Divine within them, only when they have had a wake up call; when their life, their material or emotional life has faced breakdown. Jonah, Yonah, the soul, the Divine lover, is only aroused from slumber when the boat is about to sink. The story of Jonah is one of spiritual awakening.

And what of the fish, the whale, the sea monster? Perhaps the story suggests that Jonah had died: no one could survive the violent, destructive power of the sea. In mystical Judaism, it is said that the fish is a symbol of reincarnation. I said reincarnation, not resurrection. It is perhaps in his second life that Jonah makes his way to Nineveh as God called him to do. It is in his second life that Jonah makes his way back to the presence of God. The Franciscan Richard Rohr says that it is in the second half of life that we make our way to God. It is only after we understand that the first half of life, the life of this world, does not satisfy, does not bring wholeness, that we enter upon the second half of life. It is in Nineveh, the restored Nineveh, the Nineveh at one with God, that Jonah encounters the

presence of God. Similarly, in the letters of St Paul, we are called to devotion of the Sacred and away from worldliness. The apostle of Christ wrote of becoming one with the Spirit of Jesus, a oneness which turning away, repenting, of our desires for worldly gratification. These ancient narratives, like the story of Jonah, are rich and call for such beautiful imaginative engagement.

Spiritual depth is no less present in the Gospels than it is in the Tanakh. In our Gospel lesson this morning we heard the story of the call of the first disciples. Our lesson began with a call to repentance, to a turning away from the seductions of the world to the Kingdom of God. The first ones to be called are the fisherman, Simon and Andrew. Jesus says to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' At a literal level, these stories of men leaving their nets, leaving their families, without a second thought to follow a man, it seems, they had never seen before, beggar belief. However, at a deeper, more spiritual level, fishing for people creates a picture of pulling people from their submerged consciousness, out of a state of unawareness into a new reality, a larger, fuller life. The God-intoxicated holy man, Jesus of Nazareth, brought people to that deeper, more profound spiritual awareness. He brought them to

God-consciousness. Fishing for people is a faith narrative about rising to a new awareness of the Sacred.

The second ones to be called are also fishermen, James and John.

James and John leave their father Zebedee. The story is very similar to that of the call of Elisha: Elisha leaves his father to follow Elijah.

At a moment's notice, Elisha said, 'I will follow you.' In Hebrew, the name John is *Johanan*, which means Yahweh is gracious. James, from the Hebrew *Ya'aqov*, can also be rendered Jacob. In the Old

Testament, Jacob was the father of the twelve founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Is it possible that in this faith narrative of the call of the first disciples we learn that God of Jesus is gracious and that in Christ the twelve tribes of Israel are reunited, restored, made one?

Is this why we are told their names in such apparently fanciful, strange stories?

I am also struck that James and John leave their father. It reminds me of the creation narratives of Genesis in which a man is said to leave his father and mother to become one flesh with his wife. It is a story of union, marriage; a story of lovers. Like Jonah, the disciples are lovers of Christ, at one with the Spirit of Jesus. In a spiritual deep

sense, the disciples leave behind the world to be one with the Holy. Like every other human being on the planet, we have a God-obligation to care for one another, care for creation, for the environment and for the animals. That is part of what it is to be human, and it is also an expression of faith. But, at their best, the great religious traditions of the world facilitate encounter with the Eternal. The one thing which the religions of the world bring to the table, which the secular world cannot do, is encounter and experience of the Divine, the Mystery at the centre of all things. The story of Jonah and the call of the disciples is about seeking and finding the presence of the God. These stories are about spiritual awakening.

Amen.