

“Who cares?” **(Jonah 3:1-5, 10)**

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth....^{3:10} When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:1-5, 10)

Once every three years, this brief selection from the book of the prophet Jonah makes its appearance in our Common lectionary cycle. So it's a rare treat to have a look at this often misunderstood short book of only 44 verses. Most of us learned a bit of Jonah's story in Sunday school and remember that he spent some time in the belly of a large fish – or, as Ira Gershwin wrote in his lyrics to *Porgy and Bess*:

*“he made his home in
that fish's abdomen.
O, Jonah he lived in a whale.”*

For most people, the rest of the story remains very vague.

But it is a compelling story about the prophet Jonah and about God – and about who cares for whom.

The story of Jonah begins very abruptly: *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ² "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."* Jonah is commanded by God to tell them to repent and return to God and thus enjoy the fullness of God's grace and love. In response to this directive from God, Jonah *set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.* In effect, when God asked Jonah to save the people of Nineveh, Jonah replied: *Who cares? Who cares about them?*

Jonah had a pretty good reason for his lack of concern for the Ninevites. Nineveh was, at that time in the late 8th century BCE, the capital city of the Assyrian empire, the same empire that had captured the northern part of Israel in 722 and deported its citizens, and the same empire that a few years later almost succeeded in capturing Jerusalem. Israelites remembered these events and had seen the Assyrian empire and its capital Nineveh as the embodiment of violence and terror and all that

*Historiae celebriores Veteris Testamenti
Iconibus representatae, 1712.*



opposed the Lord and the Lord's people. The prophet Nahum wrote from this perspective about Nineveh, foretelling its downfall, saying:

*Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and booty...
All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you.
For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil? (3:1,19)*

Those whom the book of Jonah addresses just a few generations later would have had memories of their own ancestors suffering under the cruelty of Nineveh and the Assyrians. It is quite understandable that an Israelite prophet would be reluctant to accept a mission to that city. It would be as if a Jew who had lost his family in the Holocaust were asked to undertake a mission to Germany just after the Nazi period, there to preach a message of repentance and God's love.

Just last week, in one of our Bible study groups at the Latvian Cultural Centre, we were discussing the book of Jonah and raised this very point: would a Latvian, whose family had been deported and murdered by the occupying Soviet regime, be willing to preach repentance and God's love to the very people responsible for mass murder and decades of oppression. For many in that Bible study group who were eye-witnesses to Soviet crimes, the answer was similar to Jonah's: *who cares about them? Let God punish them.*

Indeed, *who cares?* With all the injustice and suffering in the world, with the endless appeals for our aid in all manner of catastrophes, we all reach the point of saying: *who cares?* For some it takes the form of *donor fatigue*. You know it well: the outpouring of Tsunami relief aid was impressive; the relief effort for victims of the earthquakes in Pakistan was less generous; then there was hurricane Katrina, and the continual famines and civil wars in Africa, the Aids crisis, ...After a while, great tragedies in distant third world countries and calamities that bring suffering to thousands of people are reduced to a few second video clip on the evening news and we reach for the remote control to find something more entertaining...just one way in which we all, sooner or later say *Who cares?*

There is also the fatigue that comes from realizing that even if *you care, no one else seems to care*. We are told that Jonah was a prophet already before this latest directive from God. Perhaps he had already preached to his own people, perhaps he had already tried times to bring people to repentance, encouraging them to return to the Lord. Perhaps, if there had been a sharp-witted psychiatrist around at that time, he might have diagnosed Jonah as suffering from something like PFS – *prophet fatigue syndrome*, - the realization that no one cares about your concerns for justice, Aids in Africa, the environment or whatever. *Who cares?* And then even the prophet may lose heart and join the chorus: *who cares?*

But *God cares*. Of course, God cares. The book of Jonah is all about God and what God thinks. In the 44 verses of this book, the Lord is mentioned 39 times. It is a book reminding us that God cares *intensely* about all of us and lets us feel the intensity of that concern which John will later state fully in his Gospel:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."¹⁷ Indeed, God did not

send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (JN 3:16)

Yes, God cares. From the beginning of His covenant with His people, God has wanted that His people – all people- enjoy the fullness of life’s blessings, if only they live according to His Words of Life. God cares that we choose paths of true life, true peace and love for ourselves and for all creation. Moses reminded the Israelites of God’s caring shortly before they entered the promised land:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ...Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you... (DT 30:15)

God *cared* for the Ninevites, He cared that they make the right choices in their lives and in the life of their community, and put before them the choice between true life and its blessings, - or the death of the soul, which will lead inevitably to the death of a civilization.

But it is not just the inhabitants of Nineveh who are the objects of God’s caring – it is *also* Jonah; he cares that Jonah find his true *self*. Although Jonah tries to *flee from the presence of the Lord*, God never stops caring for him. In the story, there are literally no depths to which Jonah can sink, where God’s care cannot still reach him. Jonah descends to the depths of the sea, in the belly of the whale - to the ancient readers of this book the furthest place from the heavenly throne of God -, but even there God’s care for Jonah’s soul still lifts him up and brings this reluctant prophet to a realization of his true self.

And God then commanded Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh; this time he did, preaching to them the gospel of repentance and God’s mercy. There seems to be nothing that can distance neither Jonah nor the inhabitants of Nineveh from the love of God. Indeed, as St Paul would write centuries later to the Church in Rome:

... neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.(RO 8:37-39)

The inhabitants of Nineveh seemed to appreciate the truth of this wonderful promise, so they repented of their evil ways, donned the traditional sack-cloth and ashes to show their repentance and prayed ...and waited, hoping that the Lord would have mercy on them- which, of course, he does.

Jonah finds this all very displeasing. He preferred to have the Ninevites suffer the magnitude of punishment that only God can dole out. So he goes outside of the city and sulks in the protective shade of a bush which God made to grow there. The bush and its verdant shade made Jonah happy. But during the night, God infested the bush with

worms and then with drought in the day, so the bush died, and Jonah was exposed to the blistering heat of the sun. When Jonah, lamented the death of the bush, God chided him, saying: You neither planted this bush nor cared for it, yet you were sorry to see it suffer and die. Should I not, therefore, also feel sorry about Nineveh and its many people? And if you read the text itself, God also expresses his care for the animals of the city!

The book of Jonah is only one of two books in the Bible that ends with a question. On who should God have mercy? For whom should God care?

There are many similar unanswered questions in the Bible about the limits of our caring and about how our caring should reflect God's love for all of His creation: *Am I my brother's keeper?*(Gen4:9) *Who is my neighbour?* (Lk 10:29) *"If [another] sins against me, how often should I forgive?"*(Mt18:21) The unanswered question at the end of the book of Jonah leaves it to us to decide *who will care, and for whom will we care?* Are you only your brother's keeper, or do you have responsibility for the welfare of a stranger? Or even your enemy? Who is your neighbour, and where are the boundaries of the neighbourhood of your concern? Who can you forgive, and *what are you able to forgive?*

On the eve of our national election, a lot of people are asking: *who cares?* Do our politicians *really* care? Who cares what promises they make? Who cares which party gets elected? And the cynicism evident in the relatively low voter participation of recent elections may be a factor of the poor choices offered to us; as one political wag quipped, this election is a choice between the untrustworthy, the unacceptable, and the unelectable.

I would not presume to tell you how to vote, not having the right to vote myself – yet. But each election in a society is in a very really way a means in which we ask ourselves *who cares?* Who cares enough to vote? Who cares – about our country, our neighbours, our future?

The story of Jonah is a reminder to us that God cares, and that he cares about his people. It is also a lesson, that God calls his people to care, to see every person, - and as in Nineveh's case even every animal – as an opportunity for God's redemptive and life-giving love to be made known.

And in Nineveh's case, redemption and life were not achieved through a mighty miracle wrought by God alone and imposed upon a passive peoples, but redemption and life began through the work of one person, initially reluctant, and the subsequent deliberate thoughts and actions of a concerned citizenry. That's the way societies and nations create justice, prosperity and peace for their people – through the inspiration of God, and through the work of its citizens bringing their faith to everyday life, through their concern for their neighbour, - yes, and through elections.

Except, of course, if one just sits back and says, "*Who cares?*"

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