

Date: 18th September 2011

Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Jonah 4

Background to the reading

Nineveh was a great and populous city, the flourishing capital of the Assyrian empire. It was situated on the eastern bank of the river Tigris. Its ruins are across the river from the modern-day major city of Mosul, in Northern Iraq. The bottom line: Nineveh was a gentile city which any Jew would despise. It is no wonder Jonah did not want to go.

So Jonah wanted to flee from God to Tarsus the capital of Cilicia, in Asia Minor. But the Lord “mana” prepared a fish to swallow Jonah just as He prepared a “vine” to provide shadow, but also “prepared” a worm to eat the plant and “prepared” an eastern wind to let Jonah understand who is really in control.

The book of Jonah is a literary masterpiece in terms of clever word play, storytelling techniques, and use of characters. It portrays the tension between what God wanted and Jonah’s own beliefs and assumptions. It is almost as if the “main character” in the story thinks he is in full control while everyone else knows THAT the Lord God is really in control. Nineveh’s repentance led to the reaction of mercy from the Lord and great displeasure from Jonah. What pleased God displeased Jonah. When Jonah is angry the Lord is “slow to anger” and patient. When Jonah is full of anger and judgment, God is forgiving and compassionate. But God has the last word and the question He asks Jonah is really the question of the whole BOOK namely: “Who are you [Jonah] to question me?”

It is also quite interesting how the writer uses different names for God, emphasising a specific characteristic of His being. As Yahweh He is the God of Israel, but as “Elohim” He is also the God of every nation on this earth. As “Yahweh Elohim” He is the creator of the “vine” and the “eastern wind” AND THE WORM.

The east wind or “sirocco” is the “warm wind” from the desert. It is a hot, gusty wind laden with sand and dust and occurs most frequently in May and October. The temperature in a given place often rises 15 or 20 degrees within a few hours, bringing thermometers to the highest readings of the year. It is customary for the people to close up the houses tightly to keep out the dust and heat. The heat and dryness wither all vegetation. It is also a strong wind which could damage ships at sea.

The plant that grew is however uncertain. There was even a huge debate among the church fathers in the early church. To some it was a “vine”, to others a “castor vine, a shrub with large leaves and common in Eastern lands”. Possibly the word is equivalent to the Egyptian *kiki*, which is the castor oil tree. However, the textual versions of the Greek translation of the Old Testament favor the bottle/gourd plant. But while it is true that the gourd plant is commonly employed in Palestine for

shading arbors, either plant could have provided sufficient shelter for one man's relief from the unrelenting rays of the Assyrian sun.

In our reading we find that several emotions were involved: anger and displeasure as well as a lack of understanding from Jonah. Jonah literally hated what God had done. He was a prophet who misunderstood God's mercy and had a limited view of God's plan for the redemption of the Gentile people of Nineveh.

But our reading ends with God's last word which is mercy. The Lord had compassion not only for all the people in Nineveh but also for their animals. Just as Jonah was concerned about the vine plant that died, so is the Lord even more concerned about all the people in Nineveh. They are literally, "not able to distinguish between the left and the right," meaning that they did not know truth from lies or right from wrong. But they repented and God forgave them!

The book ends with a clear contrast between the ways of God and the ways of Jonah, as a representative of all humans!

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse 4: *"But the LORD replied, 'Have you any right to be angry?'"*

The book of Jonah teaches us a few lessons. Communication with God is essential. But in order to have communication with God we need to have a living relationship with Him where we trust and obey Him. We need to listen to His commands and be receptive to His words.

We live in a world where it is all about COMMUNICATION. We understand fairly well how important it is to communicate and listen to the other party. Jonah did not listen to God. He was just listening to himself, his emotions, his reputation and his own preconceived ideas. He was not open to accept the sovereignty of God to change His mind.

It reminded me of a story I read about two men who did not communicate very well. "A new resident was walking down a street and noticed a man struggling with a washing machine at the doorway of his house. When the newcomer volunteered to help, the homeowner was overjoyed, and the two men together began to work and struggle with the bulky appliance. After several minutes of fruitless effort the two stopped and just stared at each other in frustration. They looked as if they were on the verge of total exhaustion. Finally, when they had caught their breath, the first man said to the homeowner: "We'll never get this washing machine in there!" To which the homeowner replied: "In? I'm trying to move it out of here!"

Jonah wanted God to judge the people of Nineveh. After all they were the enemies of Israel. But God saw their remorse and repentance and forgave them. Jonah did not like the idea that he was not in control. He wanted to be the "only" one who had a voice. After all he was sent to Nineveh as a prophet. Jonah was only interested in a one way conversation where he had the last word. He was only interested in his own hurt feelings.

But Jonah had to learn that God always has the last word. God is in control. God has a plan for each and every person. God is the big architect and nothing happens just by chance. God cares about each individual despite background, culture, race or gender. The story of Jonah is about God who has compassion for all people.

And we understand this compassion of God so well because we are the recipients of God's mercy and grace through Jesus Christ. We can wholly agree with the confession that "God is slow to anger" when He took away all our sins upon Him. We live daily under his constant care and love. We are constantly reminded of His loving presence through His Holy Spirit.

But just like Jonah – although we know that God is compassionate, we also question Him when things do not go our way. We also like to take control of our own lives. We like to pluck the plan from God's hands and do our own thing. And then when things do not work out, we become angry at God. Or when we live according to His plans, and we encounter hardship, we also become angry, as if it our "right" as His followers to become angry and disheartened.

We have no "rights". All we have is responsibility to live as God's children, accepting His grace, mercy and love through faith alone. All we have is what He has given us. We cannot claim any credit. We did not deserve or earn God's grace. He gave it to us because he cares and loves just as He did with Jonah and Nineveh.

God's love goes beyond human understanding, beyond cultural differences ... We must trust God to know He knows better, see further than our human eyes and listens even to the slightest sound of our heartbeats.

Amen