**Sunday 21st**

**January 2024**

**The Third Sunday**

**after Epiphany**

**The Revd**

**Andy Braunston**

**Note**

Having George and Ira Gershwin’s controversial song*, It Ain’t Necessarily So* at the start of worship may feel a little odd when gather to listen to God’s word, found in scripture, sermon, song and silence. The Gershwin brothers were Jewish, well versed in the Bible and the music of the Synagogue, and used those influences to write their song - a song which reminds us to think, interpret, and search for truth. We read and interpret the Bible always in community, knowing that truth is found in many ways. Today we listen to some of Jonah’s story – a parable about fidelity – the faithfulness of the pagan people of Nineveh and the disobedience of Jonah.

**Call to Worship**

We gather this day, O God, Source of all that is, to listen to Your voice, heard in scripture, sermon, song, and silence. **Help us to listen.**

We gather this day, O God, our Saviour and Sovereign, to rest, recharge and repent, to be confronted, again, with Your powerful Word. **Help us to listen**

We gather this day, O God, Spirit of fire and energy, to be inspired and provoked to show our love and life to a hurting world. **Help us to listen.**

We gather this day, O God, Trinity of tender love, that we might learn to be Your Church, obedient to Your will and faithful to Your call. **Help us to listen.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness**

Great God, Source of life,

we come to worship with our praises and prayers,

needing to both rest in Your presence

and find food for our journey.

Great God, Guide through life,

we come to You in worship with our pain and our protest,

needing to find both forgiveness and passion for life.

Great God, Goal of life,

we come to You in worship with our weariness and our yearning,

needing to find both energy and inspiration.

Most Holy Trinity, forgive us when we’ve

avoided Your call,

denied what Your actions,

and decried others who seek You.

Forgive us, Great God, and give us time to change. Amen.

**Words of Assurance**

Hear good news – God loves us and, when we turn back, runs, like a loving father, to welcome us home. Hear good news God is like a fierce mother who looks out for us, grieves when we suffer, and delights in our joy. Hear good news, like a rock, God is steady and sure giving us a firm foundation. Hear good news – you are forgiven, have the strength to forgive yourself. Amen!

**Grumpy Jonah & Curious Disciples – An Introduction to the Liturgy of the Word**

The book of Jonah is a highly entertaining parable about God working in unexpected places with unexpected people. The pagan folk of Nineveh respond to God’s call, through Jonah, and repent. Jonah, first resisting God’s call running off to Spain, then getting thrown overboard and delivered up from a whale, sulks when the people repent! He’s the type of preacher that delights in the sins of the congregation and looks forward to divine punishment – of others of course. Jonah’s grumpiness in the face of God’s grace is in stark contrast to the willingness of Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow. We play, today, with themes of call, fidelity and disobedience. Let’s pray.

**All Age Introduction**

You could get a version of the Jonah story from a Children’s Bible and get some [joke sick](https://www.jokeshop.co.uk/det/5288/Fake-Vomit/)

to make the point about Jonah being vomited out of the mouth of the fish/whale.

You could get the youngsters to hide around the church and then get a few adults to find them – the point is that Jonah tried to hide from God but couldn’t as God’s love always finds us.

**Prayer of Inspiration**

Faithful God, speak through our infidelity.

Calling God, speak through our disobedience.

Curious God, speak through our indifference,

that we may hear, change, and find life. Amen.

**Readings**

*Jonah 3:1-5, 10* | St Mark 1:14-20

**Sermon**

The Jonah passage is a parable. The story was written to be subversive in an era after the return of the Jewish elite from exile. Those who had been left behind had married people from other cultures and faiths. There were strong pushes for people to prove their fidelity to God by divorcing their pagan wives and abandoning them and their children which would have meant destitution and death. The writer of Jonah clearly didn’t think this understanding of God’s will was necessarily so.

Against that background we read of the self-righteous disobedient prophet and the king, people, and cattle of Nineveh who repent even though they aren’t supposed to know and understand God. Imagine telling such a story in a culture wanting racial and religious monotony. Imagine the reaction of the priests wanting to cast out foreigners. I hope people laughed with delight as they heard the story, and after they finished laughing thought deeply about what was necessarily so. It makes us wonder who really knows God.

In the Bible – those outside God’s people tend to get things more readily than God’s own people do! Balaam’s donkey knows better than Balaam, Ruth – the pagan outsider finds her way into God’s people despite Naomi trying to send her away, and the Good Samaritan who knows and does God’s will more than the priest and the Levite. They all hear God’s voice and obey whilst God’s people turn away. They all know God better than God’s own people do. Jonah hears God – he knows what God wants but runs to the other end of the world. The pagan sea farers know that he’s displeased God and throw him overboard; even the fish gets God’s will better than Jonah and spews the reluctant prophet out at the right place. Bizarrely, the people of Nineveh repent after hearing a one sentence sermon which doesn’t mention God “forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” If only preaching was so easy! If only it was necessarily so!

Jonah’s part in the story is as the unfaithful member of God’s people. Maybe the writer used him as a metaphor for the leaders of the day. Jonah knows God’s love and mercy but acts as if he doesn’t. In the passage following on from today’s Jonah becomes furious that the people repent, and God forgives them. Even Jonah’s sermon doesn’t mention God’s love and mercy – the other prophets always implore people to turn back to the love and grace of God. Jonah just preaches doom and yet the people still repent. In this wonderful story the one who knows, or should know God acts as if he doesn’t, whilst the ones who don’t know God act as if they do!

God’s love and mercy extend beyond the boundaries of race and faith and the story teller has a lot of fun showing this. Faithful pagans know God better than the unfaithful prophet proving it ain’t necessarily so!

In our Gospel reading we have a rather better reaction in the story to God’s call. Instead of running away, Simon, Andrew, James, and John all respond to Jesus’ call to follow. Not knowing what that call might involve they trust and follow. Like the writer of Jonah, Jesus is being subversive in his story telling. Jesus chose to proclaim the Kingdom of God which stood in stark contrast to the earthly kingdom of Herod and the Roman empire. Anxious to show he was a good Jew, Herod the Great rebuilt the Temple – a prerogative of kings, he arranged for the construction of buildings over the tombs of the patriarchs in Hebron to show he honoured Jewish traditions, and he built cities to impress his patron the Emperor Augustus. Herod’s son, Antipas, built a city just three miles from Nazareth and then another city, Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee. These cities stood as the prestige and power of the Herodian dynasty – Jesus is not recorded as entering those cities. Instead, Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom is about call and response – a call to repentance and a change of life having repented. Jesus called people to change direction so that they would be orientated to God and made God’s priorities their own. Such a radical change involved resistance – something hinted at in Mark’s opening verse in today’s reading noting that Jesus’ cousin, John, had been arrested by Herod Antipas.

Jesus’ subversive message was not his alone to proclaim. He called four people in today’s reading and continues to call people to follow him, to undermine the power structures of this world with the sure foundation of God’s kingdom. In both the Gospel reading and in Jonah the key to understanding is the idea of call and response. God calls and we must decide how to respond. Will we, like Jonah, run to the ends of the earth or, like the disciples become curious followers? Will we, like Jonah, become grumpy about God’s all-inclusive love or, like Jesus call all people into God’s kingdom? Will we, like those who ruled Israel after the Exile, insist that only we know God or will we, like the anonymous writer of Jonah, seek discipleship amongst those on the outside?

Help us to expose and turn the tables on injustice

So that evil may not have the last word. Amen

**Affirmation of Faith**

Across the ages, O God, Source of Life, we hear Your call to love justice and mercy and to show kindness to the poor and the stranger. **Other refuge have we none.**

Through story, comedy, history, and fable, Risen Jesus, we hear Your call to follow and subvert the powers of our age as we proclaim Your coming realm. **Other refuge have we none.**

In worship and work, rest and play, and in solitude and stillness, committee and council, we hear Your call, O God, Goal of our Existence, to make bread, life, and beauty available to all. **Other refuge have we none.**

Help us, Eternal Trinity, to hear and respond when You call, that we may be found faithful for **other refuge have we none.**

**Intercessions**

Eternal One, we hear Your call to love our world and we bring You now its praise and pain, its power and protest.

We pray, O God, for all who are displaced by war, terror, persecution, climate change, and poverty. We hear Your call to be justice and peace makers knowing that this risks anger and hatred.

*pause*

**Give us the strength, O God, to follow where You call us.**

We pray, O God, for those in despair…those who think life is not worth living, who can’t make ends meet, who struggle in insecure and poor accommodation, who yearn for asylum to be granted, who long to live with dignity.

*pause*

**Give us the strength, O God, to follow where You call us.**

We pray, O God, for those who are ill in mind, body or spirit, and those who care for them

*longer pause*

We remember those who are lonely and isolated and for those whose grief seems overpowering.

*longer pause*

**Give us the strength, O God, to follow where You call us.**

We pray for ourselves, O God, that we may reject any tendency to be judgmental like Jonah but, like the Ninevites in the story, respond to Your call with eager longing.

*pause*

**Give us the strength, O God, to follow where You call us.**

We join all our prayers together as we pray as Jesus taught saying Our Father….

**Offertory**

Giving is part of our response to God. We give because it’s good for us, it helps us be free from the clinging allure of wealth. We give because it’s good for others, through our gifts lives are changed. We give because God gave and calls us to do the same. We give our time, our talents and our treasure. We give through cash in envelopes or lose on the plate, we give direct to the bank, we give through Gift Aid. We give and we thank God for the opportunity to respond to the call to make a difference.

God of all that is good,

we thank You for the myriad gifts You give us,

bless these gifts we offer now,

that we may use them wisely

and always hear where you are calling us to follow. Amen.

**Holy Communion**

O Most High,

before the ages You called us to be Your own people,

blessed us with precious law, raised up judges in time of crisis,

and, through the prophets, gave us the hope of salvation.

But we turned away from You,

trusting in war, alliance, and politics instead.

In the bitter years of exile, You sustained and reformed us,

just as You had during the wilderness years.

Despite the agonies of invasion and occupation,

You taught us to trust in the hope of liberation.

Jesus, our Saviour, in the fullness of time You became one with us,

bearing our flesh and our frailty,

suffering our pain, and feeling our protests.

You proclaimed liberation to the poor, freedom to the imprisoned,

sight for the blind and the Year of Divine Favour.

You subverted the powers of the age,

turning the tables on the indifferent rich by lifting up the lowly.

Yet You were struck down by evil men,

betrayed, tried, tortured, mocked, and crucified,

where Your arms stretched out between heaven and earth

revealing powerful liberating love that seeks us out and changes us.

In the tomb You defeated the powers of death and destruction,

showing Yourself to be a wounded healer.

Most Holy Spirit,

You came upon frightened disciples,

teaching them the power and grace of inclusion,

helping Your Church to see You at work

in unexpected places with unexpected people.

Help us, to hear Your call,

subvert unjust power,

and proclaim Your all-inclusive love.

For we remember the night when Jesus,

before he was struck down,

shared in the simplicity of meal with his friends.

During the meal he said the ancient blessing over the bread,

broke it and gave it to his friends saying:

“This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying,

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Come now, O Holy Spirit,

transform these simple things of bread and wine,

and make us obedient to Jesus’ call

to show forth his sacrifice on the Cross

by this broken bread and outpoured wine to eat and drink.

Help us to recognise that Jesus, himself, risen and ascended,

is present here and gives himself to us

for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.

United with Jesus,

and with the whole Church in earth and heaven,

we gather at this table to present You, Eternal One,

our sacrifice of thanksgiving

and to renew the offering of ourselves in response to Your call;

we rejoice in the promise of Jesus’ coming in glory,

and, through Him, with Him, and in Him,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

we know that all honour and glory is Your’s, O Most High,

forever and ever. Amen.

These are holy gifts for holy people,

Eat and drink and be renewed for service.

*Prayer after the Words of Institution*

*echo the Basis of Union’s words on Holy Communion*

**Post Communion Prayer**

Most holy and loving God: for being present among us, **we thank you!**

For making us one with You, **we thank you!**

For enabling us to know You more, **we thank you!**

For feeding us with Your bread of life, **we thank you!**

For uniting us with Your people, **we thank you!**

For the reminder of your covenant promises, **we thank you!**

For this sign of forgiveness, **we thank you!**

For the time to express our gratitude, **we thank you!**

For the promise of a future together, **we thank you!**

*The Worship Source Book,*

*Calvin Institute of Christian Worship,*

*Grand Rapids, MI, USA, 2013 p355*

 **Blessing**

May the One who has called you since before the ages began,

the One whose eyes have gently smiled at you,

the One who accepts your nets and your labour,

bless you, that you may proclaim the good news,

show gentle love to those around you,

and accept all who are placed in your path.

And the blessing of our Almighty yet playful God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, ***or***  Source, Guide and Goal

be with you now and always, Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Loving Creator Grant To Your Children |  | 116 |  |  |
| Psalm 62:  | 696 | 42 |  |  |
| Jesus Lover of My Soul | 332 | 490 | 355 | 372 |
| For Your Generous Providing |  | 655 |  |  |
| I Watch the Sunrise |  |  | 469 |  |
| Lord You Have Come to the Sea Shore |  | 532 | 558 |  |
| Jesus Calls us O’er the Tumult | 355 | 509 | 250 | 359 |
| Follow Me, Follow Me | This [link](https://www.godsongs.net/2014/05/follow-me-follow-me-leave-your-home-and-family.html) gives some info |
| I heard the voice of Jesus say | 349 | 540 | 248 | 275 |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*

**Other Ideas**

Play It Ain’t Necessarily So by George and Ira Gershwin either the Bronski Beat or Porgy and Bess version at the start of the service.