

JONAH 1,2
MISSION PARTNERSHIP!

Mission is something God does. Mission is something God has called us to be His partners in. I believe both of these passionately. I discovered the first of these a few years ago: mission is something God does. From the beginning of time, through the Bible story, the history of the Church, to 2016 God has a mission; God is up and doing His mission. It has gone through phases and stages: from the creation of the world, to the choosing of a people, the sending His Son, creating His Church, building a kingdom, creating a new heaven and earth – God is on a mission; He is achieving something. God has called us to be partners in His mission: what a privilege and honour that is, to be partners with God in His mission in the world. He sends us to make disciples; He calls us to be the light of the world; He challenges us to tell others about Jesus; we are to reflect Jesus to the world around us. God has called us to be His partners in His mission; we are not doing our mission and inviting God to bless what we do; God is doing His mission and He invites us to join in.

This is the heart of the story of Jonah. This is what makes the story of Jonah so complex. It seems a simple story on the outside: it is the story of a man whom God calls to be a prophet, but he runs away and gets swallowed by a big fish; God gives him a second chance which he takes and there is revival in Nineveh as a result of Jonah's preaching. That is the story in a nutshell, but there is more to it than that! It is all about the mission of God and how Jonah sees (or doesn't see) His place in that. He doesn't want to be God's partner, because he doesn't like the mission on which God has embarked! We have seen what it took and where Jonah was when he changed his mind!

God has a mission and Jonah is called to be God's partner: "Go to..." (*Jonah 1:2*) Nineveh was a great city of the ancient world, something like 500 miles away from Jonah's home town, but more importantly it was a Gentile city, the capital of the Assyrian empire. Jonah was a Jew. It would seem a good task for a Jew, to preach against the wickedness of this great foreign city, but something in Jonah's heart knew that there would be more to it than that; his gut instinct told him that God would be merciful to these people and he was not wrong. "But Jonah..." (*Jonah 1:3*) Jonah got it; he knew God's mission and he understood God's mission only too well; he didn't like it, so he decided to put as much distance as he could between himself and God's mission; he sailed away and the boat was caught in a storm; the men threw him overboard and he was rescued by a big fish! From inside the fish, he prays the prayer of chapter 2, more of which later. God had a mission for Jonah!

God has a mission for us; last week Scott talked about that mission for us as individuals in terms of acts of kindness to others, telling others about Jesus and showing Jesus to the world by the kind of people we are. We'll talk about that mission today for us as congregation: *Building Christ's Church in the community* – that is our mission statement; that is how we have discerned God's mission in our community and our place as His partners; this is what we sense God calling us to be and do as His Church, being the church and being in the community. We are trying to work out what that means for us as a congregation today and for the next 30 years. That's what *Shaping the Future* is all about. Later in the year, we will apply that same title to the life of congregation, I hope; at present we've applied it to our buildings. This is about us as a congregation trying to discern the mission of God in our church and in our community and how we are called to be God's partners in that mission. *Shaping the Future* is not a game in which some try to score more points than others; it is not a competition to see who can express their point of view most often and most loudly; it is certainly not a competition between pews and chairs! As a congregation, we are

trying to discern what God is calling us to be and to do for next 30 years. That's hard, but that's what we're trying to do.

Jonah's problem was not that he didn't understand; Jonah's problem was that he did understand and didn't like it. He knew exactly what God was calling him to be and to do and he didn't like it, so he tried to run away. That created a problem for Jonah: you can't outrun God; wherever he went God was already there; even in the belly of the fish, God was with him. He wanted a secret hiding place from God; God gave him that hiding place, but not quite as he had planned because God was there too. "*In my...*" (Jonah 2:2f) This was his lowest point; this was his darkness and despair; "*I have...*" (Jonah 2:4) There is nothing worse for a person of faith than to think that God has gone away; we are banished! "*To the...*" (Jonah 2:6) Yet in that place of dark despair, God reached out to Jonah in grace and mercy and God restored him to life. In His mercy, God gives Jonah a second chance.

It is not being inside the belly of the fish that is hardest for Jonah; the worst part of his experience is the sense that he is banished from the presence of God. Somehow he has failed and God is punishing him for his failure, he thinks. The words that he uses express his distress and his despair, that he is thrown away by God because of his rebellion. God has brought him to this dark, lonely place so that he could come to himself. In fact, he discovers that the opposite is true: "*Those who...*" (Jonah 2:8,9) He comes away discovering something far better, far greater. "While he is at the nadir of his misery he discovers the permanence of grace." (Nixon p.145) God is full of grace; God has not gone away and abandoned him. But Jonah also discovers that grace demands a set of responses from him: grace demands his repentance, acknowledging that he got it wrong; grace demands his change of heart and mind, that he will listen to God, he will go to Nineveh, and he will be prophet for Nineveh; grace demands that he will focus his eyes on God, rather than on wanting his own way. God is gracious and Jonah is a repentant, changed man.

Does a church have a divine right to exist for ever? Some 10, 15 years ago, one of the Presbyterian Churches in New Zealand went through a process with their congregations and identified three groups of churches: first, there were strong churches that had a good future; secondly there were those that were getting by and with bit of support would be OK; thirdly, they identified those churches that were dying and to these congregations they said "we will help you to die gracefully". Where do we want our church to be on that kind of spectrum? I have been minister in Edinburgh since 2000; I can take you to congregations that 16 years ago, saw they had a future and it may not have been bright, but they had a future. 16 years on, some of these congregations have already disappeared as separate entities and there are others going same way. Are we saying that God has gone away from these churches? No; I believe that God is there with them when they worship. There must be some other reason! I know there are lots of reasons for churches dying, some reasons are peculiar to these places, but for some, the reason for their dying and disappearing is a failure to engage in the sense of the mission of God in their community.

This is all about patterns of church life and how these patterns allow churches to engage with this sense of mission. For some, the pattern of church life has not changed at all in last 30,40,50 years; they are doing the same things today as they did 40 years ago and are doing these same things in the same way. They are trying to speak about church to people like them who lived in their community 40 years ago, but these people are not there any more and the people who are there don't understand the language of church that the church is speaking! People are tired and no longer have the resources to consider the mission of God. In a few years time, a

number of congregations in the city will cease to exist and somewhere along the way, for some of them, this will be the reason. I met the Session Clerk of a congregation near where I used to live; his congregation was growing and he said to me “I don’t like all these new people; they are changing the church!” He meant it!

Jonah understood what God was about. We will see next week that his gut instinct was spot-on! Jonah understood, but God had to take him down into the belly of a fish, and more into a place of darkness and despair and repentance before he could find grace and life and salvation and embrace the mission of God in a new way. The wise person finds another way: *“Everyone who...” (Matthew 7:24)* This is what we’re about; we’re trying to listen for what God wants of us as a church. We have different views on what that will mean in the end; some are saying one thing and some another; for every one of you who is advocating caution there is another of you who is excited by the radical nature of our plans! That’s where we are; but where do we go now? This is not a political referendum; this is a people of God trying to discern what God wants of us. What do we do now? We pray: make this whole project a matter for your prayers every day; pray not to get your own way, but pray for wisdom and discernment from God! We must love one another: if I thought that this project was going to split us apart, I would abandon it tomorrow; let’s do nothing to destroy the spirit of love that exists amongst us because that’s what God wants from us most of all. Keep our eyes fixed on Jesus: He is our salvation; He is our hiding place; He is our hope and help; He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

God is on a mission in world; God has called us to be His partners in that mission. Our task is to discern, understand, and see what that mission is; and then embrace it. We will find that hard; there will be challenges ahead; we will be taken outside our comfort zones; we will need resolve and courage to persevere; we will need grace towards one another. *“Salvation...” (Jonah 2:10)* Is there a better song to sing together than that?