



10th May 2009
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Jonah 1 vv. 1–7, 15– 2 v. 10
Luke 5 vv. 1–11

**Seeing beneath the surface:
Vocation – Seeing under the Sea**
By The Rev'd Canon Vanessa Herrick

An Anglican bishop was once asked to describe the part of the country over which he had oversight. “I am the only bishop in the Church of England” he said, “whose see is under the sea.”

And it is true.

For little remains of the ‘city’ (as it once was) of Dunwich, on the east coast of England – the thriving medieval port which gave its name to the suffragan see of the Diocese of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich. Once the capital of East Anglia, home of some 3000 people, site of eight churches, five religious houses, three chapels and two hospitals, it now consists of little more than a single street, a few houses and an excellent fish and chip restaurant.

For the rest, all is under the sea – washed away by coastal erosion, known only to divers and underwater researchers, save for the occasional flotsam and jetsam of everyday life washed up upon the shore, and the legendary sound of muffled church bells, carried on an incoming breeze....

For it is hard to see under the sea.

* * *

The sea plays a part in both of our readings this evening. The story of Jonah is well-known:

God calls him to prophesy against the wicked city of Nineveh, but he refuses and flees to Tarshish by ship. A storm rages and the pagan sailors pray unsuccessfully to their gods to still the waves. Desperate, they cast lots to discern who amongst them is the cause of the gods’ wrath; the lot falls on Jonah and he confesses that he is running away from God’s call. So, as a last resort, the sailors throw him into the sea; the storm is assuaged; the sailors turn to worship the God of the Hebrews and Jonah is swallowed by a very large fish.

In the belly of the fish, he prays to the Lord and gives thanks for his rescue, vowing to turn back to God and fulfil his vocation. So God calls him again, and – this time – Jonah goes to Nineveh and proclaims God’s impending wrath. Nineveh turns from her wickedness and God has mercy on this wicked, but now repentant, foreign people.

But Jonah is angry at God’s mercy, thinking his prophetic calling has all been a waste of time. So, God teaches him a lesson in humility and tries to help Jonah see things from *God’s* perspective – a perspective that underlines his wide and deep compassion for humanity.

In the story of Jonah – as in so many instances in the biblical narrative – the ‘sea’ is symbolic of all that is out of order, chaotic, dangerous and uncontrollable. It was the pre-existent chaotic waters that God drove back to create the heavens and the earth. It is through the waters of the flood that God destroys rebellious humanity and yet saves Noah and his family and the creatures of the earth. It is the sea that is the place where

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monsters dwell – Leviathan, referred to in the psalms, the books of Job and Isaiah and in Jewish rabbinic literature. It is the raging and unpredictable sea that, even in the New Testament, causes anguish to the fearful disciples and has to be quelled by the commanding words of Jesus.

All of this is true to the Hebrew and ancient near-eastern understanding of the sea. And yet, our New Testament reading this evening offers us a different perspective on the sea... For when Jesus encounters the weary fishermen of Galilee one morning, after a fruitless night of fishing, he shows them that the sea can also be a place of rich harvest and extraordinary bounty... if only they could see it. “Put out into the deep water,” he says, “and let down your nets for a catch”...

But it is very hard to see under the sea.

* * *

So what has all this to do with vocation?

I want to suggest that there are a number of insights from our readings this evening which may be applied not only to vocation in the sense of *personal* calling – that sense of being led by God into new things at different stages of one’s life; but also in respect of the *Church’s* calling – together – to be God’s people in his world.

The personal and the corporate.

And I want, this evening, to say a little about each.

* * *

Firstly, *personal* vocation:

For some, discerning a call from God can feel like swimming in the dark. You are aware of things all around you, and yet they seem invisible, un-graspable, unclear, exhausting and (at times) even chaotic or threatening. In a way, my role as Director of Ministry and Vocation is to help people to **see under the sea** of all that is going on in their lives – to give them a different perspective, and to encourage them to persevere in what can sometimes be a lengthy and demanding process.

But discerning a calling, nurturing a vocation, is not always as straightforward as it might be...

Like Jonah, there may be an overwhelming desire to escape – a sense of not wanting to do what you’re being asked to do. The risks are too great. But the Jonah story tells us that what is *sure* is that, one way or another, God will find you out and bring you back to that point of challenge.

The question is, will you say ‘Yes’ this time – or will you go on running away?

Like Jonah, other people will almost certainly be involved in working out your calling – and they will not necessarily be those you expect! The pagan sailors were the ones who uncovered Jonah’s disobedience and set in motion his return to the right path: God uses many different ways and many different people to tell us what he wants.

The question is, who are you listening to – and are you *really* hearing what they are saying?

Like Jonah, (and this is perhaps one of the hardest things to acknowledge), we may think we know better than God what is best for his world. Indeed, we may not want to commit ourselves to a path that will lead us to have to work with those who are ‘on the outside’, ‘on the margins’, ‘beyond the pale’.

The question is, do we also have to learn a lesson in humility...?

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I think of one man I worked with, some years ago, who had fought long and hard with God about the possibility of ordination. He came from a different culture; a different religious background; he was ill at ease with himself and he had many things to work through in his own life. But God did not stop ‘nagging’ him until he came to a place of humility, and finally allowed other people to begin to help shape his journey towards priestly ministry.

But the encouraging thing in all this is that, for Jonah, it was *in the midst of the chaos* – in the belly of the fish itself – that he came to **see under the sea**. Indeed, it was in the depths, in the darkness, at the point where his life was in the balance and God seemed very far away, that Jonah recognized his foolishness in running away and his deep desire for and dependence upon God. That doesn’t mean he was perfect from then on. Far from it!

But God did not give up on him.
God gave him a second chance to heed his call.

**God helped Jonah to see under the sea.
But what about the *Church’s* vocation?**

It would, perhaps, be to over-dramatize to suggest that we live in a world that is ‘out of order’, chaotic, dangerous and uncontrollable. The global ‘sea’ we inhabit is, perhaps, not quite yet a raging storm populated by leviathans and sea monsters. And yet, there is an increasing sense of its fragility and vulnerability; an awareness that the forces of unrest, disturbance and chaos appear to be growing stronger.

In a very literal sense, global warming will, indeed, mean melting ice sheets, rising sea levels, coastal erosion, flooding in low-lying parts of the world.

Economic calm, prosperity and growth has been washed away by waves of anxiety and uncertainty about the future of global markets – where no one is in control and no one can be trusted. Political unrest – often fomented by fundamentalism and terrorism – threatens a tidal wave of oppression and uncertainty, violence and destruction, and the bulwarks of international mediation struggle to hold it back.

It is to this potentially chaotic sea of our world that the Church is called – called, like the Galilean fishermen, to put out into the deep and ‘to catch men’, as the King James version puts it; called, like Jonah, faithfully to proclaim the judgement, yet also the compassionate mercy, of God for all humanity.

But discerning that calling, nurturing that vocation of the Church, is not always as straightforward as it might be...

Like Jonah, there may be an overwhelming desire to escape – a sense of wanting to run away from our prophetic and missionary task. Or, like the weary disciples of Galilee, we may simply be tempted to give up. The night of ‘fishing for souls’ has been long. The struggle ‘to bring in the nets of the Kingdom’ too hard. The risks of drowning under the weight of the world’s needs are too great. The work is too demanding. We are tired.

The question to the Church today is, will we say ‘Yes’ to God’s call – or will we go on running away?

Like Jonah, we may have to learn to listen to the unexpected voices – the philosophers, the scientists, the economists, the media commentators, those whose religious and political ideals may differ from our own, and yet whose awareness of the issues and sensitivity to the action that needs to be taken is so often far greater than any that the Church can discern or muster on its own. Like the weary fishermen of Galilee, we may be forced to accept the help of others because our own resources are simply not enough to cope.

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The question to the Church today is, to whom are we listening and with whom are we working as we seek to fulfil our vocation under God?

Like Jonah, (and this is perhaps one of the hardest things to acknowledge), we so often think we know better than God what is best for his world. Indeed, we carry with us a sad history of blindness and deafness in matters of justice – slavery, complicity in political domination and oppression of others, poor stewardship of the resources and gifts of God in creation. All of these speak eloquently of a Church that continually needs to acknowledge its failure and smallness and turn once more to dependence upon the wisdom and guidance of God in its actions in the world.

The question to the Church today is, do *we also* have to learn a lesson of humility....?

These are, perhaps, sobering words.

And yet what emerges from our New Testament reading – as from the story of Jonah – is that God does not give up on us – either as individuals or as his Church.

He give us a second chance to heed his call.

He helps us to see under the sea.

Several years ago, an Anglican parish decided it wanted to ‘do something’ for the young people in its community. Sensing that this was the right way forward, but taking little time to pray, discern or consult others about their plans, the parish employed a youth worker and set up a Friday night youth club. At first, things went well: the young people were pleased to have somewhere warm and welcoming to meet; and the free coke and cakes was a bonus. But after a while, things began to go wrong. Factions began to emerge amongst those attending – the product of a longstanding rivalry between two powerful families on the local estate. Things became very tricky for the youth worker to manage; alcohol and knives started to appear; the police became involved and within 6 months the club had to close. The Church was deeply disappointed at its failure and relationships with the wider community were, for a time, scarred.

Whatever, the rights and wrongs of that particular venture, one cannot help thinking that taking time to listen to God; working with other statutory agencies and listening to their experience; and (even more importantly) *listening to the young people themselves*, might have been a wiser way forward in responding to God’s call.

Their motivation was right in wanting to serve, **but they could not see under the sea** of their own community. They needed to transforming perspective of Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to help them discern the right way forward.

For, just as God met with Jonah in the belly of the great fish; and just as Jesus met those fishermen on the shore of Galilee, Christ meets the Church in the ordinariness, the disappointment and the weariness of its existence. He longs to use the Church for his continuing work of preaching and bringing in the Kingdom. He invites the Church to persevere, to try again, to take the risk of looking foolish, and to put out into the deep water of our sometimes crazy world and to work with others to bring the whole of humankind into his embrace. He goes on encouraging us to follow him and to hear his call to serve the world.

The global sea in which we live may seem, at times, to be an unwelcoming and dangerous place, unpredictable, inhabited by strange and disturbing creatures; but in Jesus Christ, we have one who not only calls us personally and corporately to follow him, but who, by his Holy Spirit, gives us grace and power and courage to face its challenges and be the channels of his love and compassion to the world.

The question to us today, in *all* our vocations – personal and as the Church – is, are we willing for God to give us *his perspective* - to help us, once more, to see under the sea?

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