

SERMON FOR TRINITY 15 in CREATION SEASON | 13.09.2020

Jonah 3: 10 – 4: 11; Philippians 1: 21-30; St Luke 16: 19-31

Introduction:

Ted Harrison, a long time Religious Affairs Correspondent at the BBC, was reflecting recently on the effect of the lock down on people's likely future Church-going habits. After a life-time of weekly attending, he had spent the last six months enjoying long country walks on Sunday mornings – and if his interest had turned to things spiritual, he had dipped into a range of podcasts and streamed services, from the whole range of traditions and from all over the world. I was lulled into agreeing with much of what he said until his last remark: *Perhaps I will, he said, no longer be a regular worshipper. I will find I draw much inspiration, joy and comfort from the sound of a cathedral choir, or saying evensong in a small country Church. But I will have confirmed to myself that God is bigger than the average Sunday morning Anglican version.*

Ouch! And how disappointing. Because I have always believed that what we were doing – even with the proverbial two or three gathered in his name - was to be taken to the gate of heaven, praying with the angels and saints and allowing ourselves to wrestle with some of the greatest challenges of our day, drawing together worship and faith exploration in a way that gives space for the Holy Spirit (in some mysterious way) to be at work.

Never have I felt that God was not at the heart of it all, and that we were trying to engage with big ideas and big issues as a result!

And so today we enter this short, three week, 'Creation season', reminding ourselves of the simply huge challenges that we face on this planet - and, with the help of the story of Jonah, asking whether any of this has anything to do with us!

For the PowerPoint slide presentation

- 1 Earth in Trouble: There are five times as many wild fires as in 2018: California, Australia and Greece most familiar: actually most fires worldwide are in SE Asia (and are therefore largely unreported)
- 2 Deforestation: Between 1990 and 2016 an area of forest the size of South Africa was lost. In the Amazon 64million acres of forest are lost – each year.
- 3 Desertification: The result of overgrazing, deforestation and drought – and global warming
- 4 Soil degradation: Even in Europe, soil is massively affected by industrial pollution and over-grazing

- 5 Cereal production: Growth of crops is subject to drought disease, salt, and fertiliser dependence
- 6 Biodiversity: The balance in the natural world is seriously affected by population growth and the over exploitation of natural resources
- 7 Natural habitats: Subject to industrial farming techniques, urban sprawl, mining and logging
- 8 Livestock: Beef production produces 6kg of methane per kg of meat. Beef is the most carbon intensive of all foods
- 9 Threat of extinction: Within the next 40 years the following will almost certainly become extinct: polar bears, chimpanzees, elephants, snow leopards, giant pandas and rhino. Dozens of species are lost each year.
- 10 Fossil fuels: Extraction causes untold damage to the environment and the destruction of wildlife habitats. They cause acid rain and waste water is a serious problem
- 11 Air pollution: carbon dioxide remains a major health issue
- 12 Marine Waste: The 'Great Pacific Garbage Patch' between Japan and Hawaii is said to contain over 480,000 pieces of plastic
- 13 Marshland: The world's marshlands, sources of fresh water and animal habitats, have diminished by 50% since the end of the First World War
- 14 Drinking water: The recent heavy storms and hurricanes are responsible for the leaching of effluent into the natural drinking water supplies throughout the Caribbean and southern states of America
- 15 Melting glaciers: The rise in temperatures caused by the increase in carbon dioxide from transport and the burning of fossil fuels not only leads to rising sea levels it also contributes to storm surges, hurricanes and coastal erosion
- 16 Coral Reefs: The destruction of coral reef not only kills a whole range of marine life, it stops the coral's ability to protect the sea shore
- 17 Migration: leads to the abandonment of swathes of sub Saharan habitat and the growth of urbanization in host countries, It is estimated that there will be 143 million economic migrants from South America, sub Saharan Africa and Asia alone by 2050
- 18 Tourism: is, on its own, responsible for 8% of the world Co2 emissions.
- 19 Mission Impossible? Climate change cannot be ended but it can be mitigated and, at least up a point, lived with. But the challenge of the Paris Agreement is to keep the increase in temperature - this century - to 1.5%... We are already falling behind that target.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores...

Sharing those ecological facts and figures with you earlier, I found myself having very mixed emotions. In a vague kind of way they were all very familiar; you can't watch the news - and see the fires in California or New South Wales for example - without realising that there is something very wrong going on here. But to learn that, in twenty-five years, we have lost forestry equivalent to the size of South Africa... And I am a tourist and I have been flying to wonderful places over the years - and contributing to that annual 8% of dangerous Co2 emissions leading to the melting of the polar ice cap and to the dying of coral reef... Let alone driving from Calais to Dover recently and simply not noticing the attempts that were (invisibly to me) being made by economic migrants to try to make that same journey through immigration control.

And yet there was a bit of all this which rankled a bit. Am I really going to stop eating beef - or perhaps all meat; am I really contributing to that plastic mountain in the Pacific or to the slow extinction of polar bears? Isn't it hard enough living in the 21st century, in the middle of this pandemic, trying to make sure Maria's mother can get to Yorkshire by train to see her granddaughter without breaking the latest coronavirus rules? Am I not entitled to turn on the tap or the electric light switch without feeling guilty?

Abraham, in Jesus' story, is quite blunt: *you had it easy and poor Lazarus here, had nothing. You barely recognised that he was there and you did nothing for him while you were both alive. Can you wonder that the tables are turned in the afterlife?*

The story of Jonah teases this out, not least because Jonah is a good deal more conscientious and intelligent than the Dives in the Gospel. Jonah had been a pretty reluctant ambassador for God; didn't he try to take a boat in the opposite direction from Nineveh and hadn't God gone to some lengths - with the help of an obliging whale - to get him to where he should have been?

Jonah has already had to face up to the fact that he was working for a God who had rather more care and compassion than he could muster himself? As he argues: *Isn't that what I said while I was still in my own country – that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...?* Jonah is the archetypal reactionary: looking at the average resident of Nineveh he positively wants them to suffer. It pleased him not one bit that, having been told their faults, they actually listened, put on the proverbial 'sackcloth and ashes' and changed their behaviour in very short order? It is all so very true to life when we hear God asking Jonah, *Is it right for you to be angry?* Of course it isn't, but Jonah simply can't stop himself.

And so God teaches Jonah a lesson – and us as we read this short story. Jonah is out there, sulking in the heat, hoping that God would do a bit of smiting – for all the wrong the people of Nineveh had done. After all they deserved it. It was only fair. In the meantime he builds a small shelter for himself while he watched to see what would happen. He is hot – and he is short tempered.

Whereupon, without any intervention from Jonah, a small bush grows up alongside Jonah and it helps to keep the sun off. Lucky Jonah. *And Jonah was very happy about the bush* that he had done nothing to plant. And equally unhappy when a worm attacks it overnight and the bush dies! What he took for granted has been taken away and he sobs like a baby: *It is better for me to die than to live!*

And we laugh at Jonah's blindness – and fail to make the connection with ourselves. Just like Jonah, so much of what we take for granted is given to us as pure chance. If we lived in the Amazon, in the slums of Mumbai, on the refugee island of Lampedusa having sold all we had to get a place on an inflatable boat across from Libya or among the AIDS orphans in eastern Zimbabwe, we would have none of these things. 90% of what we take for granted simply doesn't exist there.

And the question that we keep on having to ask ourselves is: *but do these people have anything to do with me?* Them, and their problems, are a very long way away. I might see the issues highlighted on the news – the fire, the floods, the famines - but there are there for a moment - and then they are gone again.

And God said to Jonah, *you were concerned about the bush for which you did not labour which came into being in a night and perished in a night. Should I not then be concerned about Nineveh, that great city whose people do not know their right hand from their left?*

In just the same way God is speaking to us, asking that we do not just walk away from our responsibility to make sure the Creation he has entrusted to us is not destroyed by our lack of attention – and ultimately our love and care for those who just happen to live closer to the problems than we do.

We have to listen, too, to the prophets (even perhaps, Extinction Rebellion?) whose insights and expertise we will need to rely on. As Abraham says to Dives in Jesus' parable when he begs for someone to warn his brothers of their fate if they don't change their ways, *If they don't listen to Moses and to the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead.*

Two stories: the same appeal for us to listen – not out of fear and concern just for ourselves but out of a true and lasting compassion for those we cannot see, metaphorically 'living at our gate'. That is what it means, Ted, to believe in a great big God.

In the words of today Psalm 148:

**Praise the Lord from the heavens,
praise him in the heights.
Praise him, all you angels of his;
praise him, all his host.**

How do we do that? By doing all in our power to protect the planet.