

Sermon: Epiphany 3.

Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 62: 5-12; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20.

Do you have a favourite gospel? I am not sure I have, but there is something about Mark that has grown on me over the years. Mark's Gospel is concise and to the point and I have heard it said that it is an acquired taste. It is precisely because it is concise that it leads and challenges us.

Most scholars believe Mark was the first of the four gospels to be written and that the writers of Matthew and Luke "had Mark open in front of them" as they wrote their gospels. You could ask why we have four different gospels, why not combine them? Entire books could be written on that question, but I think the most important thing to remember is that each of the gospel writers had their own agenda. They were eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life, but they didn't just write about what they saw and heard. Each wrote to develop the faith of the communities in which they lived, and they all promote slightly different ideas about what they understand about Jesus and what it means to be his disciple.¹ This is exactly the reason why context is so important when considering bible stories, we cannot take them at face value. Similarly, we need to pay attention to words because we are only reading a translation of the original and most words can be translated in different ways. Words may have had a different context for the writer than the reader. Lastly, it is not only the gospel writer that has their own agenda, but the translator will also have a purpose in mind.

Well, Mark's Gospel is short on words, so let's focus on one – Repent.

Repentance is a difficult word for many of us, it doesn't sit well in our 21st century mindset. It is interesting to observe the difference in the way Jesus uses this word as compared with John the Baptist. John the Baptist reminds us more of those doomsday prophets with the signs "Repent for the kingdom of God is near". Yet when Jesus uses the word repent it is more positive, one scholar going so far as to say that 'whenever the word repentance is on Jesus' lips, joy is in the background'.² In today's reading Jesus' use of the word repent is literally in the same breath with believing in the good news.

If we dig a little around the Greek word for repentance – *metanoia* – we find there is a difference in how we use and understand this word. In English "a focal component of (the word) repent is the sorrow or contrition that a person experiences because of sin, the emphasis in *metanoia* seems to be more specifically the total change, both in thought and behaviour, with respect to how one should both think and act."³ It is about turning to God. We turn towards the abundant life that God wills for us.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine. *The Gospel of Mark*. Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 2023. P. xii.

² Quote attributed to German theologian Helmut Thielicke, quoted on the By the Well podcast for Epiphany 3. <https://bythewell.com.au/episodes/b209-epiphany-3>

³ LOUW & NIDA: Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains (Louw & Nida) 1989. United Bible Societies. Entry 41.52: μετανοια.

The reading from Jonah warrants some attention here. This is the only time we encounter Jonah in our three year lectionary cycle. If you have never read Jonah from start to finish, I encourage you to do so. It is filled with satire and hyperbole – and in places it is really funny.

People don't behave in the way you would expect – there is a King who humbles himself and even the animals wear sackcloth. This is a very public repentance, in Nineveh of all places. It challenges the Israelites theology about how God operates and how they understand themselves and God and their enemies. It is very hard to accept that God has the freedom to restore enemies, especially as a people who thought they were God's chosen ones.

Some scholars maintain that Jonah was written in the post exilic period, after Ezra and Nehemiah. Daniel Smith-Christopher argues that Jonah was written to counter the exclusivism and emphasis on purity that you find in Ezra-Nehemiah. It highlights that actually God loves all people, even though God has a particular role for Israel.

Our self-righteous anger at what should be is really challenged by this story too. You get the feeling that Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because deep down he knew that God would change God's mind if the people of Nineveh were given the warning. Jonah is not committed to the task, in fact he runs away from it (or tries to). After God relents, Jonah is furious with God. You might say he asks God the question 'Why don't the boundaries of your love and mercy coincide with mine?'⁴ Leading on from that - I wonder how many times we have encountered that mindset in our time and place?

There is a tension here, between the Ezra Nehemiah emphasis on purity and the more universal vision of Jonah. Like the people of Israel, there is a particularity about our call. We might feel uncomfortable about the term purity, but in our world we might consider the things we stand for that may put ourselves at odds with the wider culture.

There is also a question here about how we see the other. Like Jonah, do we want to see those we consider different from us, those outside our mainstream culture as a fellow human? Do we want God to include them in God's loving embrace?

I, for one, am looking forward to this year with Mark. Amy Jill Levine said "Each time we pass through (Mark's) Gospel it is not the same, for we are not the same. Each time we are confronted with new mysteries and challenges".⁵ We begin a walk, a turning towards the abundant life that God gives us. Today we heard Mark's Gospel proclaim the Good News of the kingdom coming near in Christ, a kingdom which throws shadows on the kingdoms and the world that we live in. Yet, Jonah reminds us that it's not up to us to judge the world.

So what DO we do? I'd like to finish with another difficult word – evangelism. The Gospel reading finishes with the call of Simon, Andrew, James and John when Jesus promises to make them 'fishers of people'. I was challenged this week to consider how we embrace and embody that call. We tend to be a little embarrassed and apologetic about evangelism. We

⁴ By the Well podcast for Epiphany 3. <https://bythewell.com.au/episodes/b209-epiphany-3>

⁵ Amy-Jill Levine. *The Gospel of Mark*. Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 2023. P.154.

don't want to use bait to pull people in. Why are we so reticent? After all we are sharing what is most central and precious to us – an invitation to life with God and participation in God's great mission of love and justice.⁶ We need to be mindful of the fact that when we fail to do this, we are acting a little like Jonah. We are judging the other as one who hasn't found the kingdom.

As we learn through Jonah, God loves all people, even though God has a particular role for Israel. Mark teaches us that we draw near to God by sharing the good news. Like Jonah, maybe we make it more difficult than it needs to be.

⁶ By the Well podcast for Epiphany 3. <https://bythewell.com.au/episodes/b209-epiphany-3>