

Address for 7 November by Ash Leighton Plom

Call and response. Something we do quite a lot of in church. Call and response. I pray, you say, "Amen". I say, "The Lord be with you", you say...

Both our readings this morning involve call and response, and so I want to consider what God is calling us to do today, and how we can respond.

In the Gospel reading we've just had, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news, calling on people to believe.

He finds Simon and Andrew casting a net, calls to them, and they respond by following him. Then just about the same thing happens with two other brothers - James and John. Jesus calls them, and they respond, leaving their old way of life behind to follow Jesus.

Call, and response.

In our first reading, God calls Jonah. He says, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah sets out to Nineveh, in response to God's call.

Jonah then dutifully calls on the people of Nineveh to turn from their old way of life, and how wonderfully they respond: they repent, proclaiming a fast, and God shows mercy to them. Call and response - and result!

Jonah is one of my favourite prophets, only four short chapters, perhaps four pages in your bible depending on print and page size, and well worth the maybe 10 minutes it takes to read these 1,000 or so words.

Many of you will know "Jonah's whale" pretty well, and so it won't surprise you to note our reading said, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah *a second time*, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh,'" - a second time because this second call happened *after* the whale incident.

Perhaps, as we're thinking about call and response, and for those of you who don't know it yet, it'll be worth reviewing when the call of the Lord came to Jonah the first time, and what he did in response then. Chapter 1 verse 1 of Jonah says, "the word

of the Lord came to Jonah saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'"

Note it said, "Go *at once*". But Jonah instead tried to flee to Tarshish [which is now Spain], finding a ship, paying his fare, and going on board to sail away...

So chapter 1 verse 4 says, "But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up." Now, that escalated fast, in just four verses! "The mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo into the sea," to lighten the ship, and Jonah clocks that the storm has arisen because he has failed in his response to God's call. Instead of going to Nineveh, he's legging it to Spain.

Redemptively, to save the others, Jonah voluntarily consents to be thrown overboard - giving his life for the sailors, a foreshadowing of Christ giving his life for us.

And so Jonah sinks, and actually goes right down even to the ocean floor, to what he poetically describes as "the roots of the mountains", "the waters closing in" over him, the deep surrounding him, weeds wrapping around his head. And as he sinks, he prays. He recalls in chapter 2 verse 2:

"I called out to the Lord in my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of the Pit I cried, and you heard my voice. You brought up my life from the grave, O Lord my God."

Jonah called and God responded, even though Jonah's own failure to respond to God's call is what had put Jonah in this deadly predicament.

Many of you know about the whale, which is coming soon, but most people don't notice that Jonah experiences a resurrection miracle. Jonah died when he sank, I mean there's no way he could have survived what he's describing, sinking to the ocean floor below the crushing weight of the sea, and he specifically states that God restored him "to life from the grave" (Jonah 2.6). And so understandably Jonah declares when he is saved, "with shouts of grateful praise... Salvation comes from the Lord!" (~2.9)

It is then that the Lord provided "a large fish to swallow Jonah up; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights", another sign of Christ, of

course, (see, for example, Mark 8.12) as Jesus was in the grave for three days and Jonah is again a foreshadowing of this.

But back to call and response: in Jonah 2.10, "the Lord spoke to the fish," and it responds by propelling Jonah out onto the dry land. It is finally now, after being "spewed" up onto the land by the whale, that "the word of the Lord comes to Jonah *a second time*, saying, "Go to Nineveh, and proclaim to it the message,'" which was where our set reading for this morning kicked off.

Scholars debate Jonah's motivation for refusing God's call in chapter 1, and it's not really until chapter 4 that we hear Jonah's own explanation. At the start of chapter 4, Jonah moans that God's mercy to Nineveh seems to him "very wrong", and he prays despairingly, "this is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love". It seems Jonah's fear was that he would call on the Ninevites to change their evil ways or face destruction, and they might respond with faith and action, and as a result God would show them mercy.

At first, it can be a little hard for us to understand why Jonah would think of mercy as a bad thing. But the context is in chapters 1 and 3, when we learn Jonah is an Israelite, whereas Nineveh is a "great city" - as in a superpower - where the people do "evil things". Jonah, as a person from Israel, feared, perhaps resented, and apparently even hated the Ninevites, and would have preferred God to destroy them than show them mercy.

I want to say, partly this rests on his arrogance and sense of holiness and righteousness. He hadn't noticed how desperately *he* needs God's mercy, as we all do (Romans 3.23). Whereas, when we're humble enough to confess that we are ourselves sinners in need of God's mercy, I think it follows that we treat others with more mercy, instead of wanting them to suffer "justice".

So, to bring this together and come in to land, I want to ask: who are you in these readings? We have, juxtaposed, Simon et al on the one hand who respond immediately to Jesus, vs. Jonah on the other who takes some persuading!

And who is God calling you to fish? Like he said to the first disciples, he says also to you - I will make you fish for people. We have opportunities onsite and online, Sundays and throughout the week, to hook our friends and family, colleagues,

classmates, neighbours, to catch them with an invite – a call, and to pray for their response. They may surprise you with a yes, and I anticipate the result.

And one final question: who are the Ninevites to you? Who are the people or what is the thing that God might be calling you towards, to view more mercifully, to be more kind to, people or things that you'd rather avoid?

In our parish life, especially in our Next Steps and diocesan commitments to pray, grow, and serve, we have a moment, an opening, to recalibrate our attitude towards “Others” who might feel in a way like Ninevites to us – a kind of alien, different culture – and to consider them afresh with God’s perspective of mercy in superabundance, mindful of how great a mercy He has shown us in calling us, and offering us opportunity to respond.

So please let’s not miss this chance, and need asking again like Jonah. Let’s pattern ourselves instead more on the models of St Peter, St Andrew, St James, and St John, who responded at once to follow Jesus.

So, who are you fishing for this week, and who is God calling you towards, to be merciful to, and to share the good news with, that he has proclaimed?