

On a day we take Lachlan to the water, the lectionary dishes up for us a watery tale or three! Nothing fishy about this – it is all about us looking again how to respond, or in the case of Jonah, how NOT to respond when the Almighty calls!

Too often, I've sat through people reading through the book of Jonah in Church like it was the Church of England in the Chapel Royal. My mind sometimes runs to the various comedians such as Rowan Atkinson, who would intone gracefully, *My brother Esau is an hairy man; and I am a smooth man*. And, so, in the spirit of such, we pick up the story today when *The Lord God did tickle the throat of the leviathan, and the leviathan caused Jonah to be thrown up upon the shore*.

What we have, as far as I am concerned is God's humour at work here. This is a campfire story that is being told in a manner that people remember. If you want people to engage, then engage you must! In four distinct acts, the story of Jonah unfolds. God calls to Jonah, and says, *Get ye to Nineveh, that great city, and tell them to repent, or I will smite them as I did with Sodom and Gomorrah!* Nothing wrong with that...or is there? God calls a prophet, albeit a minor one, and says, get to work. Jonah says, *Upon my life, the city is not worth it*. So he runs away.

Let's spare a thought for Jonah. Nineveh is a city of Mesopotamia, on the banks of the Tigris in modern day Iraq. It was an important junction and market place, and at it's greatest, the city wall enclosed the 750 hectares with nearly 12 kilometres of ramparts. Because it was set on a major fault line, it was subject to regular destruction from earthquake. So, a threat to be struck down like Sodom and Gomorrah would have great currency! It was a major trade route intersection between East and West...but essentially, from a Jewish point of view, gentile. If you were to wander around all the streets and suburbs, yes, it would be possible to be perfectly lost for three days.

*Here endeth the history lesson!*

What is more important is Jonah's response to the call of God. *You want me to go where?* Jonah decides that being a prophet is not what he thought it was, and as such, *no thanks, Lord. I'm out of here*. Well, as we know, *run, Jonah run, but ye cannot hide!* Three days in the digestive juices of a large fish certainly emphasised that point. And *Yoooooooooooooaaaa!* Jonah end up on the beach! (have you ever tried to type that?)!

Jonah's response to God now was somewhat lukewarm. *Repent. God is miffed with you. Repent and live*. Walking around the suburban streets and lanes, Jonah half-heartedly gave them the message. Now, being aware of destruction, something really odd happens.

They listened to the word of God. Even though they were outside God's chosen people, who, for the record, are currently in exile in the Assyrian empire, there must have been something in what Jonah said. Out of concern for their safety, they repented. They put on sackcloth and sat in ashes. They forbade their animals to eat or drink, and asked God to spare them. *And the Lord, seeing their change in heart, even though they did not really know the difference from good and evil, spared them*.

I've never been able to stop a cow or sheep eating or drinking. This Jonah guy must be REALLY good!

We know the rest of the story. Jonah sets up camp looking over the great city, expecting to see a show worthy of being turned into a pillar of salt. Instead, God *repents*. Yes, you heard that right. God turns God's back on the destruction and spares the city. Jonah is now well and truly annoyed, The show was cancelled. God then set out to teach Jonah an important lesson. Jonah gets upset that God destroys the tree that sheltered him. *You care more for the property and fabric than the people of God. Which do you think are of more importance?*

Call, it's a funny thing. Sometimes that call we receive, whether it be like Nathanael we heard of last week, taking a lifetime to realise as he witnessed the ministry of Jesus, or those chosen to directly follow and take the word of God to the corners of the world, call is call. Each call, like each one of us, made individually, bearing the divine image in our essential essence, will be varied, small, and if you like, part of a bigger jigsaw in the divine plan.

The really good thing about call is this: we are free to respond, or not. We can defer, or we can argue, but at the end of the day, the call is still there. Jonah experienced first hand the truth about God: *you can run, but you can't hide*. God's insistent call to us, as the collect in *A Prayer Book for Australia* says, does indeed unsettle our settled lives. Sometimes the journey that God has in mind requires us to prepare. That may well be physically, prayerfully, or even spiritually. Being open to God is something that is very much at the centre of each call.

In today's readings, 4 others respond to the call of God made to them by Jesus. Too often, we get hung up on *teach you to fish for people*. Let's backtrack a bit for the moment.

Mark's gospel is moving at breakneck speed. In the space of 14 sentences, Jesus is introduced. Good News of the Son of God, Jesus, Saviour. In that one verse is an important thing for the listeners. In Greek: ichtus: Jesus Christ is God's Son and our Saviour. The Greek Word ichtus Means *fish*. What we have is an ancient acrostic: *Iesous*, Greek for "Jesus"; *Christos*, Greek for "anointed"; *Theou*, Greek for "God's"; *uios*, Greek for "Son"; and *sōtēr*, Greek for "Saviour". Together, this spells ICTHUS, FISH, which as an acrostic means "Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Saviour."

You've seen the fish on the back of cars. You know the drivers must be Christian. If you see a car on the back of a fish, you could presume the same!

That's just Mark's first verse. He then gives us 30 years of quick history, including Jesus' baptism, his temptations, and John's arrest. And now, he's moved further north to the see of Galilee. His first call is to the poorer of the fishing industry. Simon, later called Peter, and his brother Andrew, are standing on the shore. He says to them, *Follow me*. No discussion – a simple call. Oddly, they do. They follow. Jesus then calls to the richer ones, the sons of Zebedee out in their boat. *Follow me, and I'll teach you to fish for people*. They drop everything, and follow him.

Looking at this, I can see why people would concentrate on the mission, but at this point, I have great sympathy for Jonah. At least Jonah was happy to dialogue with God. He was also prepared to disagree, even if it did end up with him in the belly of a fish for a while. Peter and Andrew, John and James responded to the call, and left their nets. Mark then continues the gospel with the imperative that is essential: *the kingdom of God is nye: all hands on deck*.

Today, the call is to each one of us, but shortly, more so, the call is for Lachlan. His parents, Rhiannon and Adrian have responded to the call to bring this child into the faith and life of the Church. We, in turn, respond to their calling and gladly and enthusiastically welcome Lachlan into the life of the Parish. But what does this mean for Lachlan?

Well, for now, we don't know. Like Nathanael called from under the fig tree, Lachlan's life is about to unfold with us acting, if you like, as midwives to his call. Together with Adrian and Rhiannon, and all the god-parents, we will take our part in helping him to understand that at some point, the Lord who knitted him together in his mother's womb will call on him to respond. We know not what that will be. We have no idea of the impact this will have on our lives, if at all any. And whether his life, like ours, be long or short, successful by our standards or an adventure with highs and lows, we know not. But we can be assured of this.

No matter what that call is, it begins here, now, by the water. For Jonah, the restart was by the water. For the fisherfolk, it was by the water. For Jesus, it was through baptism by John. So now, we prepare to gather by the waters, and look at wonder at the child God is calling to be with us an inheritor of the kingdom of God. We are responding to God's call of Lachlan, mindful of God's own call to us. Where this leads – only God knows, but in the fullness of that mystery, God has given us a new person in the net to set free on the path of being Christian. For that, we say *thank you God* and cheerfully, let us respond to the call.