

As schools have restarted back again after the lockdown, I've been reflecting on how challenging things have been for our young people, and also for our parents in regard to homeschooling. For us it has been a bit of a nightmare. But I suppose what it has helped me realise the most is how clever my kids are compared to what I was at their age. I was definitely the opposite at their age. However there is one subject at school that all us Campbell-Smyth's are the same at, and that's art. Drawing is definitely not our strong point, and we all do the bare minimum – kinda stick man characters to get the job done quickly. However the one thing that I did love about my art classes back in school was the plasticine; being able to mould things into different shapes. But I think the reason I liked it so much was because if you got it wrong, you simply rolled it back up again and had another go. You could do this as often as you needed until you were happy with your creation.

We all make mistakes in life, and so often in today's society, people are less patient to be able to forgive and give you another chance. Unlike the plasticine that can be remoulded again, people either hold on to grudges and never forget, or people never forgive themselves and can't move on.

The story of Jonah is an incredible declaration of a Father God who doesn't hold a grudge, and like the plasticine gives us another chance. In fact he comes to us a second time, a third time, a fourth time. He never gives up on us – that's our God. Who here is so glad that he doesn't bare those grudges? Who here is glad that he doesn't remind us of our past? He still has a purpose for your life. That's what we saw last week in our teaching on Jonah.

Jonah's now in Nineveh a second time, but God's request hasn't changed between the first request and the second. We might have other intentions about what we should do with our lives. We might even hear God prompting us but we ignore it. But God doesn't change his plan – it's perfect, and if he wants us involved in that plan then he's not going to change his approach just to coax us into saying yes. His Word is truth. His ways are just. His will is perfect.

Last week I provided a little bit of background on Nineveh, and we see today from our reading that it's described as an exceedingly great city. Now what I didn't say last week was that Nineveh was a province, but then within the province there was the city. Here's a similar modern day example. I could say to you that I'm travelling to London, but we know that within London there are a number of suburbs with their own little communities. It's the same idea. Historians tell us that the inner city had a wall that went round the city of about 7 miles. It was such a grand structure that in some parts you could put 3 chariots wide across the width of the walls – it was that big. But the greater Nineveh area had a circumference of 60 miles. There would be up to 600,000 people living in the Nineveh area. So when it says that Jonah takes 3 days to walk through it, that's why it's 3 days. It was a massive region, and again we know from last week that this is a region full of evil, immoral and very dangerous people.

So Jonah makes his way over the 3 days and stops in the various squares around the suburbs and speaks to the people with 8 words. 8 words in English, but only 5 words in Hebrew. And in those 8 words, he doesn't say that God loves them, there's no 'come to know a Father God who will give you rest'. There's none of that. 5 Hebrew words and then he moves on to the next square to say the same thing. This is his message. The word 'overthrown' in the text is the same word said to Sodom and Gomorrah. These folks weren't given any indication of what to do next. There's no little Gospel tract like we might

get on the streets to tell us how to repent. Nothing. But then again, Jonah doesn't care if they do or not. But the important thing is that he gives them God's Word. God says go to Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you. And that's what he does. He says "Forty days and your toast". That's my attempt at 5 words.

So look what happens in verse 5; the Ninevites hear the Word (all 5 of them) and they believe God. That's so incredible. It teaches us that you can have all the fancy and eloquent speakers out there that draw the big crowds at events, but at the core of what truly changes someone's life is not my ability but it is the power and the work of the Holy Spirit that is the lover of people, who calls people, who speaks to them. That's what we consider this Pentecost Sunday. That's the incredible power in Acts 2 in Jerusalem as 3,000 people accept the message and are baptised. It's nothing to do with Peter. It's all to do with the Holy Spirit.

You see I could stand today or any Sunday, prepare my words, and give them to all of you. But actually it's not what I say that matters. It's what the Holy Spirit says to you through them. You may not remember a single word that I might say, and I'm totally fine with that, because what I pray more than anything is that the Spirit of God speaks, because it's his Words, his prompting that has power.

The Holy Spirit sets his hand on the Word of God and he multiplies the message to you. He is the one talking to you about the things that I or no one else in this room knows anything about. He's dealing with you about your personal life and your personal thoughts. He's telling you this morning that he loves you. He is drawing himself to you. Folks, whatever is going on in your lives right now, don't think that this message today is not for you. Because God by his Spirit wants to meet with you today; he wants to speak into your life right now. He wants to counsel you with the wisdom of heaven for the situations you are facing. He wants to challenge you to not hold back in your service to him on the basis that you don't feel equipped enough. He's saying come, I will equip you and give you power for whatever next week brings. Your anxiety, your depression, your anger, whatever it is – the Holy Spirit is here today to reveal the Father's love for you. It's not my words, it's his that matter.

Here's Jonah and he says 'Forty Days and you are going to be annihilated', and the people believed. And here we see in verse 6 that the warning reaches even the King. He rises from his throne, a powerful ruthless man, with the blood of thousands upon thousands on his hands, and one man's 5 words bring him to his knees. No that's completely wrong. It's not one man's 5 words. Remember, it's the Word of God, bringing power and conviction into every heart. The King takes off his robes, covers himself in sackcloth – a sign of repentance and grieving – and he sits in the dust. This is a complete humbling of himself. He's saying 'I'm nothing'. How does he know to do that. Well the Spirit of God working through the Word is directing him towards an appropriate response.

And from one powerful leader, now in complete humility, a decree is issued. Verse 7 "Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish".

So how do we know the people's response was authentic? Well verse 10 tells us that God saw what they had done and God relented from his actions. God could see their hearts. It was real.

You know this passage gives me incredible comfort and hope for our town. As I think to myself about the evangelising of Ballynure and Ballyclare and the outlying areas it gives me hope for the future to know that our words will not change anything, our clever programmes are only that, but God's Words can change a city many times bigger than ours. You know the other evening I was on the phone with John Bond, the former rector of this parish. And we were chatting about some of the history of the parish. Do you know that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when St Augustine's was still the main church, there came a Sunday where the then minister (Revd Thomas Nesbitt) entered the then church to take the service, and no other parishioners joined him. The church was finished. I'm guessing it was then that he realised that something had to be done, and so with much prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit the building of St John's became a reality. And look at God's Church today – it's alive. Thomas Nesbitt could have just given up, but he knew that the work of the Holy Spirit had not finished – it was just beginning.

You see when it comes to sowing the vision that God has placed on your heart, you don't have to be a compelling communicator, you don't have to be the best at putting an argument across or have a deep theology. What matters is that you are sharing God's Word because God's Word will not return void. Isaiah 55 says that *God's Word will not return to him empty, but will accomplish what God desires and achieve the purpose for which He sent it.* When you share the Word of God, you are giving the one thing that can change everything about a person's life. This story this morning is the biggest revival story I believe in history. In the space of 3 days we can presume that 600,000 people, the most evil people of that time turn to God. One man comes in and says '40 days', and they get saved. This is the power behind the Word of God folks. Don't forget that.

If you think it is up to you to convince someone to become a Christian, or that your clever words are what changes people's hearts then you've put your confidence in the wrong things. That's why this Church under my spiritual direction will be faithful to God's Word, because it's only those Words that will change people. Can I just take a minute to say this – if you're a leader in this church, Sunday School, House Group leader, BB leader, pastoral visitor, co-working in our Compassion ministries, whatever it is – when you get into conversations with people in our community, when you speak to that child in your group, consider how much time you are speaking God's Word over them. God's word is powerful. God's word will say what your words will never be capable of saying. If all you were to do from here today is read God's Word to people, or memorise a few verses concerning salvation, then I am confident that people around us would be saved. Paul declares in Romans 1:16 that 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes'. Folks the Gospel changes people. This past year has taught everyone across the globe that all the money in the world, all the securities around us, will not save us. But have we stepped in to people's contexts and told them what will save them?

So verse 10 - ‘When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened’. Did you hear that - they turned. That’s repentance. They were thinking differently about God. And Jesus even confirms this in Matthew 12 when he says, “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here”.

So here’s a few points to take home today:

**Firstly**, God loves people. God loves Nineveh. God loves Northern Ireland. God loves unionists. God loves nationalists. God loves Ballynure. God loves Ballyclare. And because he loves people, he sends His people to the people who don’t know him, that they might hear a word from him. So if you are a Christian, there is a calling on your life, not on some, but all who say they believe in God. You are called to go to people who don’t know Jesus. So the question is not have you been called, the question is will you obey and go? And the mistake is to be like Jonah and say Lord I don’t want to do it, or Lord I don’t feel qualified to do it – that’s what ministers are trained for. Or I don’t think the person would be interested in listening to me. Folks, none of that is our concern. God has called us to go. It’s never easy. It’s never meant to be convenient. The issue is do they know Jesus, and if they don’t they need to. God is sending you today, whether that’s in to work, or into your family. Just go.

**Second**, God’s Word is far more powerful than your lack of ability. Here’s a prophet today who didn’t care about the Ninevites’ repentance, but he simply repeated the words that God gave to him, and people were saved. What does that tell you about who saves people? It’s not us. If today you don’t know what words to say, or can’t say words without feeling stupid, you are giving the greatest message and speaking the most powerful words that any human can utter when you tell someone that Jesus loves them and has died for them – if you could just say that, God will do through his power what you never thought could be said through your person. God will use anyone. At one stage in scripture he spoke through a donkey, and folks I’m living proof this morning that he’s found another donkey. He can use you.

**And then finally**, God commands all to repent. Have you repented? It’s not whether you feel like it. Judgment is coming – that’s the Word of God. He must remove all that is evil. And he’s going to judge wickedness – that’s those who don’t want him. So in his justice he must judge, but in his love he wants no one to be there. Paul says in Acts 17:28 “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent”. If you will look to him, if you will ask Jesus to save you, Romans 10:13 says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”. God saved Nineveh. He wants to save you. And he wants to save everyone in our town. What an incredible hope we carry. It’s the Gospel. Good News. So let’s get on with it.