

We live in a world in which it is much easier to hate than to love. We see hatred expressed in many different ways in our news bulletins on the TV each night and we see it as we go about our own life day by day. We each have a choice whether to hate, or at least have contempt for, someone or whether to love them. Admittedly, there are people in this world who are harder to love - and the cruel and wicked Ninevites, the people who lived in the capital city of Assyria, in Jonah's day undoubtedly fell into this category - but that doesn't give us permission to hate them. Some people hate people they don't even know much about. They just hate them on principle - perhaps because they belong to a certain ethnic group or a certain religious group or because they have certain political affiliations or have adopted a certain lifestyle. We all have to choose whether we are going to reflect the hatred of a fallen human race or whether we are going to reflect the love of a redeeming God - a God who is mighty to save!

The book of Jonah is one of the better known of the Minor Prophets but perhaps the least understood. Many people look endlessly for clever theological explanations of the remarkable events in the story, when its primary message is quite clear. Jonah is about how merciful and compassionate God is to all his creatures, and how he hates any of them to come under his judgment against sin. The commentator Campbell Morgan once said, "Men have been looking so hard at the great fish in the book of Jonah that they have failed to see the great God".

The word of the Lord came to Jonah asking him to preach against Nineveh, the largest city of the Assyrian Empire. It was famous for its brutality and violence, which are depicted graphically by the prophecies in the book of Nahum, which we will look at next Sunday. Instead of obeying the word of the Lord, Jonah ran away from the Lord. He fled by ship in the opposite direction to Tarshish, on the coast of what we now know as Spain. He was heading over 2,000 miles in the opposite direction! His journey, however, showed the futility of trying to hide from God. God acted decisively to bring Jonah back to obedience, and to an understanding of God's mercy. The Lord sent a great wind which caused such a violent storm that the ship threatened to break up.

Ironically, it was the pagan sailors who were concerned for one another's welfare. During the violent storm, they prayed, threw cargo overboard and cast lots to save one another. All the while, Jonah slept below deck, oblivious to the trouble he had caused for everyone. When they finally recognised Jonah as the cause of the peril he was thrown into the sea. The storm subsided and God provided a great fish to swallow the wayward prophet who had refused to obey his word. In the fish, Jonah was as good as dead. He had sunk to "the depths of the grave", but God graciously "brought (his) life up from the pit" (2:2,6). The pattern of death and resurrection conveyed in Jonah's prayer was used by Jesus when he spoke of the sign of Jonah. Jesus said that this was the only sign he would give to a sinful and adulterous generation (Matthew 12:38-42).

Jonah experienced the marvels of a rediscovery of God's grace while in the belly of the great fish and repented of his sin with one of the most moving and genuine prayers in all Scripture. Perhaps only David's great psalm (Psalm 51) of repentance can be said to rival it. In the light of his salvation, Jonah affirmed his trust in God as the God of grace, unlike the idols which so many people cling to. He affirmed that salvation comes from God. The brilliance of these affirmations served to highlight Jonah's extreme self-centredness. His attitude had not really changed. He was delighted to be saved from his own sin, but was angry at the thought of others being saved from theirs! He was totally out of step with the God of grace whom he served. And yet in chapter 3, God's word came to Jonah a second time (3:1). Despite his bad attitude, God persisted with Jonah. This time Jonah obeyed and went to Nineveh. There he proclaimed what he no doubt hoped and wished would be Nineveh's destruction: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned". However, the Ninevites believed Jonah's word of warning and Jonah's worst fears were realised. In one of the greatest revivals of all time, the wicked Ninevites were saved.

(Jonah 2:1-10; 4:1-11; Luke 15:25-32; 2 Peter 3:3-9)

The response of the King of Nineveh is a model response of repentance. First, he put aside his authority, acknowledging the greater authority of Yahweh, the God of Israel (3:5). Secondly, he covered himself in sackcloth - a sign of sorrow and grief over his sin (3:6). Thirdly, he issued a decree, calling on his subjects to fast and seek God (3:7-8). And finally, he acknowledged that God is sovereign and may forgive their sin, but is not bound to. He is a God of righteous anger, and the Ninevites had angered him (1:2) - but he is also a God of compassion. As the final verse of chapter 3 indicates, God's compassion won out and he did not destroy the city as he had threatened to do.

But as chapter 4 begins we are told that "Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry" (4:1). Jonah was unhappy about God's compassion - though not his compassion in itself, but the scope of his compassion. He was happy to be the recipient of God's kindness, but he didn't want that kindness shown to the wicked. He could easily have fitted into the Pharisaic party in Jesus' day who had to be reminded: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). In order to drive home the petulance of Jonah's attitude, God caused a plant to grow up and shade him, in the place where Jonah had gone out and sat down east of the city of Nineveh. Jonah was happy about the plant, but when God caused a worm to kill the plant, Jonah was outraged. He didn't want to live in a world where such injustice could occur. God now had him where he wanted him! He asked Jonah why he was so concerned about a vine which he didn't plant or look after, which was only there for a short while and was then gone. He asked him why, if his anger over such an insignificant plant is justified, God's concern over the great city of Nineveh was not! There is, or course, no answer. God has made his point powerfully and Jonah was silenced. The book comes to an abrupt but powerful end.

Chapter 4 is the climax of the book of Jonah and verse 11, the final verse, is the punchline. God is speaking through Jonah and his story to his own people, the people of Israel, and to the new Israel, the New Testament church of Jesus Christ. He is a God who is compassionate and mighty to save - mighty to save not just the Jews but people from throughout the world. This is a missionary book and this chapter is about God's heart for the world - and he wants you and me to share his heart for the world. Jesus would sooner suffer and die than allow the people he has made die in their sins - and be lost for eternity (cut off from the love and presence of God for eternity). Remember what Jesus said in the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin in Luke 15 - there is rejoicing in heaven, in the presence of the angels of God, over one sinner who repents.

What is wrong with Jonah? He should have been happy - but he is unhappy. He had been instrumental in providing the gift of spiritual life to thousands of people - yet he prefers death. He claimed to understand God's grace and mercy, which he himself had experienced - yet he resents God for it and says that he would have preferred wrath and judgment for Nineveh. One thing wrong with Jonah is that he is not reconciled to the will of God even yet. He had been opposed to God's will at the beginning and had run away to Tarshish because of his opposition. God had pursued him and brought him to the point of obedience. He had even rediscovered God's grace while in the belly of the great fish and had repented of his sin. Yet, Jonah's attitude had not really changed. He was still unwilling to see the people of Nineveh saved, and he resented the God of mercy for saving them. We often act the same, even when we are apparently obeying God. We are doing what we think we should be doing, living the kind of life we think a Christian should live. But secretly we are unhappy and even angry with God for making the requirement of us. For this reason some Christians look and act miserable much of the time.

Second, Jonah had forgotten God's mercy to him. We wonder, "How could Jonah of all people forget God's mercy? And forget it so quickly?" Jonah should have perished inside the great fish. He had renounced God. It would have been understandable if God had renounced him. Yet God had showed him great mercy, first in bringing him to repentance

(Jonah 2:1-10; 4:1-11; Luke 15:25-32; 2 Peter 3:3-9)

and then in saving him and recommissioning him to preach in Nineveh. Jonah had certainly experienced mercy at the hand of God. But there was the long journey across the desert to Nineveh, and man's memory is often short. Jonah had forgotten God's mercy and was therefore ill-prepared to appreciate it when God showed the same mercy to others, especially to the cruel and ruthless enemies of his people, Israel. We must remember this when we find ourselves wondering somewhat regretfully, why God does not judge someone else for his or her sin. When we do that - as we all do - we are forgetting that we were once where that other person is now, separated from God and without hope, and that we would not be where we are now were it not for God's great mercy to us in Christ.

The third reason why Jonah was angry was that he did not know God as well as he thought he did. Undoubtedly he was proud of his knowledge of God. He was a Jew first of all, and the Jews had received God's revelation - they had the Law and the record of God's dealings in history. Moreover, Jonah was a prophet - not just any Jew, but rather one who had studied the Law and who had been commissioned by God to speak on God's behalf. If anybody knew God, surely it was Jonah! But did he? He knew something of God, it is true. But he did not know God well enough to grieve over sin as God grieves over sin, or to rejoice at the repentance of the sinner. Instead, he was like the older son of Jesus' parable, who sulked while the father celebrated and who felt cheated by the prodigal son's return (Luke 15:25-32).

Sometimes we find ourselves wishing that the Lord Jesus would return, usher in the final judgment, and take his followers, including us, into heaven, and we are grieved when unbelievers scorn and ridicule us for believing in Christ and his Second Coming. We wish Jesus would come! We cannot understand his delay. This is because we do not understand God well enough. The apostle Peter knew people who thought like this. And so he wrote an explanation to them in his second letter saying, "....in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation"....But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:3-4, 8-9). Peter explained the delay of God's judgment by God's mercy, saying that Jesus has not yet returned so that all whom God desires to call to faith in him might be born, have the gospel proclaimed to them, and believe. Aren't you glad that Jesus did not return before you were born and believed in him? Well, then, rejoice that his delay makes possible the salvation of countless others - from nations and languages throughout the world. God is a God of judgment. But he is also a God of mercy. He is indeed "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love" (4:2). We need to know him as that.

How great is God's mercy? We have a hymn that says, "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea". But even that isn't wide enough, is it? The real measure of the wideness of the mercy of God is that of the outstretched arms of the Lord Jesus Christ as he hung on the cross to die for our salvation - yours and mine! Only his once for all sacrifice is sufficient for the forgiveness of sins. That is the wideness of God's mercy. That is the measure of the length to which the love of God will go.

How can we, who have known that mercy personally and benefitted from it so undeservedly be less than merciful to others - both our brothers and sisters inside the church and those outside the kingdom of God? How can we do less than love them and carry the gospel to them with all the strength and persistence at our disposal? How vastly different this church and our society would be if you and I truly had the heart of God! Ask the Holy Spirit each day to transform and refine you so that you have the heart of God and so choose compassion, choose mercy and choose love.

Amen

Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.