

**A sermon preached by Emma Hodge on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup>  
November 2024 at St. Michael & All Angels Church,  
Sandhurst**

May the words of my lips and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today's theme is the Power of Repentance which is linked closely to the topic of God's Forgiveness and we are looking at it through the story of Jonah.

But first I want to look at what Repentance actually is.

Repentance is found in both the old and new testaments and literally means to change one's mind, and is linked to sin. Sin is where we do not follow God's commandments and are separated by God, and can be in "thought, word or deed". Sin is part of being human, the sin that separates us from God is as a result of us not being perfect. Jesus came to earth, to die for us and to take away our sin.

Repentance is a personal action to either another person or God. Repentance is not the same as saying sorry, although saying sorry is part of it, repentance goes further. To 'truly and earnestly repent of our sins' we need to acknowledge that the action is a sin, then go on to confess that we have committed that, then to apologise to God for this and finally the act of repentance to change our mind and often the accompanying actions and

Jonah 3:1-10

Mark 1:14-20

thoughts and part of this is to commit to striving not to do it again, to learn from our sins..

Repentance is only part of the tale, the other side is God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness is part of our faith. When Jesus died for us on the cross our sins are forgiven, but the story of Jonah is in the Old Testament before Jesus died for our sins however the people of the Old Testament knew that God would forgive them; we can look at psalm 86 for example the psalmist knew that God would forgive them if we call to him in verse 5 it says "You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.". The story of Jonah features the Ninevites who were not aware of God.

Neither Repentance or Forgiveness is just a case of saying words, although that is often a critical part of both of them, they go deeper, and look towards our hearts and our actions behind those words to our minds and the feelings and emotions that lead us to commit sin and sinful actions in the first place.

If we now look at how this is demonstrated through the story of Jonah.

Our Old Testament passage today was the third chapter of the book of Jonah, and you have probably heard this tale before as it is popular with both children and adults and has many intriguing aspects to it. It's only 4 chapters long so I would encourage you to read all of it. There is a lot more to the story than just a big fish.

Jonah 3:1-10

Mark 1:14-20

The story starts with God telling his prophet Jonah to go to a city called Nineveh, which was the capital of the Assyrian empire, described as a great city and also was the enemy of Israel and Judah.

Jonah however had other ideas, and did not obey God, he ran down to the coast and got on a ship going in the opposite direction to Tarshish.

Oh dear, Jonah did not obey God, he sinned. You could understand why Jonah may have been scared of going to Nineveh, a great city that was the capital of the enemy. It probably wouldn't have been on the top places to go and visit list but this was what God wanted; God wanted the people of a non-Israelite city to turn to Him. Jonah's actions by going down to the coast and boarding a ship showed that he didn't trust and obey God.

Once Jonah is on-board the ship, a storm came up and Jonah persuaded the sailors to throw him overboard so that they could be saved. I would encourage you to read chapter 1 to understand the full discussion between Jonah and the sailors and how they ended up throwing him overboard. The sailors were not initially willing to throw Jonah overboard as they knew there was a high risk of him not surviving and Jonah had to persuade them by admitting his faults to them that he didn't obey his God.

Once Jonah had been thrown overboard, God provided a big fish to swallow Jonah and he spent 3 days and nights inside the fish,

Jonah 3:1-10

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during the time when Jonah was in the belly of the fish he prayed, and the prayer that he said is from psalm 18, in his prayer, he repented of his failure to obey God, he acknowledged that he had done wrong, that he should have trusted in God and obeyed God. The fish then gave Jonah up near land.

We then come to our story, Chapter 3

Now that Jonah is back on land, God gives Jonah a second chance. God repeats the instruction. Go to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeys, he had repented of his mistake of turning away from God's instructions for his life and he followed God's instructions to go to Nineveh. Jonah had learnt his lesson. Jonah was willing to give them God's message to the Ninevites. By obeying God, Jonah knew he had to put his own feelings and fears aside and put his repentance into action by obeying God.

God giving people second chances after repentance is not just limited to Jonah, God's forgiveness and mercy is for all of us who repent and ask for it. We are also blessed that we receive second (and third, and fourth) chances to obey God and follow him. God knows that we are not perfect, that's why he sent Jesus to die for us on the cross. And he gives us multiple chances to repent, to say sorry and to follow him, to work to being more like him day by day.

But back to Jonah, Jonah enters the city and gives his message which is short – *“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown”*

Jonah 3:1-10

Mark 1:14-20

and the city listened. We know from the bible that it wasn't an instant thing, the message was heard and was acted on by some, talked about, and the message reached the King and he took it to heart and then he decreed that the city repented by putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes and fasting.

Jonah did not go straight to the king with the message but started with ordinary people, they acted and the King realised that in order for the city to be saved they all needed to repent.

Because the city repented God did not overthrow the city. A Success!! Jonah preached his message given to him by God, the people listened and they were saved! And if you want to know how Jonah reacts and how God responds to Jonah – read chapter 4!!!

God saw that Nineveh was sinful, God sent Jonah to tell the city that they had a limited amount of time (40 days) before something catastrophic would happen. The city listened and acted and God's mercy meant that the city was not overthrown.

God sent Jonah to Nineveh to give the people of a specific city a warning

When the people listened to the warning, they realised that they need to change, and they repented.

God's forgiveness and mercy was shown to the Ninevites but the good news is it is not limited to them.

Jonah 3:1-10

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However we should also listen to the warnings that are sent to us, and recognise that we need to repent and change so that we can receive God's forgiveness and mercy.

Repentance is not just confined to the Old Testament, our gospel reading also has the message of repentance and this time it is explained why, the fact that the kingdom of God is near.

Each week in our worship we also are called to repent, Earlier in the service we confessed that we had sinned in "thought, word and deed"

*Did we just say these words or do we take a moment to acknowledge our failings and commit to try and not do the action again?*

Once we have said them, we are reassured of God's forgiveness as John gives us the absolution.

Jesus instructs us to repent, and he gives us the reason, because the Kingdom of God is near. Jesus instructing us to realise that we often need to repent as we "follow the devices and desires of our own hearts" and turn away from God. Jesus doesn't just tell us to repent, but he tells us why, that the Kingdom of God is coming.

When the people of Nineveh repented they were not certain of God's forgiveness but they received it. They repented in hope of forgiveness. They repented by putting on sackcloth and ashes, and fasting, as was their custom. Their repentance worked. God granted his forgiveness to them. The people of Nineveh continued to live. However when we repent we have the certain

Jonah 3:1-10

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knowledge that God will forgive us. God's forgiveness for us is a certainty and not a hope. We know that God will forgive us, because we know that he loves us, he loves us so much that he sent his only son to die for our sins upon the cross.

The story of Jonah is a moral story teaching us that there is a power of repentance that God accepts our repentance and gives us second (and more) chances.

The story of Jonah is this amazing story which is memorable because of the Big Fish, but that's only part of the story, the part that makes it unique and memorable but the actual meaning of the story is about God giving people second chances, of repentance and God's Forgiveness.

The story of Jonah has parallels for us today, the people of Nineveh repented and then the king repented and ordered everyone to repent. Their culture was to repent publicly, our culture is different.

This week we have seen the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury over failings highlighted in the Makin report regarding failing to act to protect children and young people by the actions of John Smyth. A resignation that may have been prompted by the petition from people to resign.

Repentance is powerful, it is not about grand public statements, true repentance comes from the heart and our desire for reconciliation with others and with God and to receive God's forgiveness.

While you may point out that Justin Welby has not publicly repented and is not going around wearing sackcloth and ashes as the people of Nineveh did, the point of repentance is not whether it is done in public or private, the importance of repentance is that it is done as a heartfelt action and that the actions, thoughts, attitudes are changed as a result.