

(3) The compassionate God

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[0 : 00] And the first part of the reading is on page 986 in the Church Bibles. Matthew chapter 12, verse 38.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. But he answered, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

[1 : 08] And the second part of our reading is on page 990 in the Bible's Matthew chapter 16, verse 1.

And the Pharisees and the Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, When it is evening, you say, It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.

And in the morning, it will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. So he left them and departed. The second reading today is taken from Jonah chapter 3, which you can find on page 936 of the Pew Bibles.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

[2 : 25] So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey.

And he called out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation, and published through Nineveh.

By the decree of the king and his nobles, let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God.

Let everyone turn from his evil way, and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent, and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.

[3 : 39] When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. Lizzie, thanks very much indeed for reading for us.

Please do keep Jonah open at page 936. We've prayed, so I want to begin by asking this morning, asking the question, how does God use his power?

If you were here two weeks ago, we saw, didn't we, in Jonah chapter 1, verse 9, that God is the God of heaven. As the God of heaven, he is the God who rules the sea and the dry land. He is in

charge of every aspect of his creation.

So how does he use his enormous and extraordinary power and authority? I think it's an important question, especially in our own culture, which is increasingly suspicious of power and authority. We see it, don't we, in international affairs, a suspicion of America's superpower status, suspicion perhaps of China and how it might use its increasing power, more recently a suspicion of Russia, as it tries to re-exert its influence in some of its neighbours.

[5 : 02] But we see a similar suspicion, I think, in the way in which our culture often responds to the fact that God is sovereign in his world, and he exercises his rule over every aspect of his creation. A culture which is happy for you to have your God, and you to have your God, and me to have no God.

But a culture which is, which doesn't want to hear of the God of Jonah chapter 1, verse 2. The God who holds all people and all nations to account.

It goes totally against the grain, doesn't it, of our post-modern worldview, as it's often called, with its dislike for universal truth. Now, if you've seen the film Bruce Almighty starring Jim Carrey, then you'll know it's one of the issues which the film raises.

At the start of the film, Carrey rants and raves at God for not doing a very good job running his world. So God gives Jim Carrey all his power and all his authority to see if he can run the world any better.

Well, it quickly becomes clear that he can't. In fact, Carrey uses his newfound power and authority to benefit only himself. No one else benefits at all in the film.

[6 : 16] He simply uses his power for his own advantage and his own purposes, often with hilarious consequences. So how does God use his power?

Well, the answer from the book of Jonah is that he uses his power to show compassion. Now, we've seen that in chapter 1. Two weeks ago, didn't we? We saw that as God had compassion on those sailors.

We saw it last week in chapter 2 as God rescues Jonah from death and judgment. And today we're going to see it in chapter 3 as God shows compassion on the great city of Nineveh.

You'll see there's an outline of today's talk on the back of the service sheet. You might like to turn to it and do take notes if that would be helpful. And John, if it's possible to open the doors just to have a bit of a draft through, that would be certainly helpful for me if no one else.

First of all then, the compassion of God and a world-class city. Have a look with me again at verses 1 to 3. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

[7 : 31] So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now, Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth.

Now, by the 8th century BC, when Jonah went to Nineveh, Nineveh was probably already the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire, which was very much the military superpower of the day. Nineveh was a huge metropolis, a world-class city. It was a London or New York. But the point here in Jonah chapter 3 is not simply that it was an important city, but it was also a city important to God. And we see God's compassion on Nineveh in three ways very clearly. First of all, God sends a preacher. God sends a preacher, Jonah, who will proclaim God's word.

Do you notice that God's command to Jonah in chapter 3, verse 2, is almost identical to the original command to go to Nineveh, which Jonah received back in chapter 1, verse 2.

[8 : 42] But it's not quite the same. So have a look back to chapter 1, verse 2, where God says to Jonah, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.

The second time round, God adds something. Chapter 3, verse 2, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, the message that I tell you.

God's not leaving anything to chance, is he? So the first time round, Jonah ran away from going to Nineveh. Perhaps the second time round, God knows that Jonah's temptation will be, yes, to go, but perhaps to proclaim a different message than the one that God gives him to proclaim.

So God ensures that Jonah is going to proclaim his own message, God's message. And that is the first mark of God's compassion on Nineveh. He ensures that his word is proclaimed.

And it's no different today. The existence of a church where God's word is clearly and faithfully taught is a mark of God's compassion on a particular area or town or village.

[10:00] I think we easily forget that, don't we? But it is a mark of God's compassion, just as the absence of a church where God's word is clearly and faithfully taught is a mark of his judgment.

So God sends a preacher. But the second way in which we see God's compassion is that he sends a preacher of judgment. Because in verse 4, if you look at verse 4, we learn, don't we, what the message is that Jonah must speak.

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey, and he called out, yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. It's rather remarkable, isn't it?

It doesn't look as if it's the kind of message which we think would win an audience. It doesn't look very seeker-friendly. It's not clever. It's not attractive.

But it is a message which is easily understood. Even the Assyrians, with all their own kind of religious presuppositions and baggage, why even they couldn't misinterpret it.

[11:06] And once again, it's no different today. In the world in which we live, in the world of Jonah, chapter 1, verse 2, where God sees every nation, where he sees every individual, where he'll call each one to account.

Why God's compassion is seen in that he sends a messenger with a message of judgment. One of the things we discovered as a family over the summer was the joy of bodyboarding in the surf in North Pembrokeshire.

The great thing about it is you can do it when it's cold and wet, just as you can do it when it's hot and sunny, which is a good thing this summer. Now, before we did it, I had to give two warnings to our children.

First warning, don't go out of your depth. Don't go above your ribcage, I think we said. Second warning, watch out for other surfers as they catch a wave heading towards you at top speed. You don't want to get knocked on the back of their head. Now, I take it that as a father those warnings were an act of kindness, just as God in his compassion sends a preacher here to warn the Ninevites of judgment as an act of kindness so that they can take action.

[12:22] And the action they take is astonishing, isn't it? Verse 5, In short, they repent.

In verse 5, practically before Jonah's finished, speaking, they fast and put on sackcloth, both of which are signs of their repentance. They do so, don't they, from the greatest, from the king, through to the nobles, through to everyone else.

It seems that none is too proud to humble themselves before the living God. And notice, they don't just pay lip service to the idea of repentance, no, it's accompanied, isn't it, by a change of behavior. As the king says in his decree, verse 8, Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. God's compassion.

He sent a preacher and he sends a preacher of judgment. But the third way in which we see God's compassion on Nineveh is that God relents from sending judgments on the city.

[13:44] Have a look at verse 10. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them and he did not do it.

Now this is the most remarkable thing of all because of course the most important question in this chapter is not so much will the Ninevites turn, will they repent, but will God turn, will he relent from sending judgments.

It's what the king of Nineveh recognizes isn't it in verse 9. Who knows God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.

He knows that God is not bound to relent. He knows that the sincerity of their repentance by itself cannot force God's hands. He knows that God is not bound to forgive.

But wonderfully he does. The third and greatest demonstration of God's compassion in this chapter. And according to Jesus Christ it's a very important lesson that we need to learn from Jonah chapter 3 so keep a finger in Jonah and turn on to that other reading we had Matthew chapter 12 which you'll find on page 986.

[15:16] Page 986. Now here Jesus is talking to some of the religious leaders of his day who won't repent and they are demanding a sign from Jesus.

Verse 38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him saying Teacher we wish to see a sign from you. Jesus replies in verse 39 that wanting a sign from God is generally the mark not of belief but of unbelief.

But he goes on to say that one sign that will be given the one sign that will be given is the sign of the prophet Jonah. In other words the sign of Jesus' own death and resurrection.

Verse 40 For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish so will the son of man that's Jesus be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.
Now notice that at the end of verse 41 Jesus says that in him is something greater than Jonah. After all Jonah only seemed to be dead whereas Jesus really died and really rose again.
[16:34] It was Jonah's disobedience that led him to appear dead whereas Jesus' obedience that led him to his death. Indeed it's in the death of Jesus that we see the ultimate demonstration of God's compassion dying on our place to bring forgiveness and life with God both in this world and the next.

But says Jesus the point is that these Ninevites repented and if they repented the preaching of Jonah how much more should these religious leaders who Jesus is talking to how much more should they repent when they hear Jesus.

But sadly that is the one thing they won't do. And so Jesus says verse 41 the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it. For they repented the preaching of Jonah and behold something greater than Jonah is here.

So what does Jesus tell us we are to learn from these Ninevites in 2008? Well they show us that repentance is urgent. And they show us what repentance looks like.

Imagine for a moment that Radovan Karadich who is on trial in The Hague for war crimes. Imagine for a moment that he became a Christian. He repents just like the king of Nineveh.

[18:05] He puts his trust in Jesus Christ. A few years later he dies and he goes to heaven. Now while he's there someone else who has just died appears at the gates of heaven wanting to get in.

He's a respectable family man, a pillar of the community he'd even lived in a desirable area of South London but he wasn't a Christian.

He had never repented and so he has turned away. Now as he leaves he catches sight of Radovan Karadich out of the corner of his eye and he shouts out that's not fair he was much worse than I was.

I wasn't as bad as him. And what is the reply he gets? No you are far worse because for all your outward respectability you never repented.

That is the one thing you failed to do. Jesus doesn't pull his punches does he? If we haven't repented if we haven't cast ourselves upon Jesus for forgiveness a genuine repentance that's demonstrated in the change of life that at the judgment day the people of Nineveh will stand up to us and say what were you playing at?

[19:36] We repented all we had was the message of Jonah but you had Jesus and yet you took no action. Now clearly those of us who are Christians here this morning while we need to be reminded don't we how serious it is when friends neighbours colleagues do not repent and do not put their trust in Jesus Christ.

But above all those of us who are not yet Christians need to see that as well because it seems to me that it's possible to investigate the claims of Jesus but actually never to repent.

It's possible to give intellectual assent to the facts about Jesus but never to repent. it's possible to be waiting for God to give us a sign or waiting until we're convinced of the truth about Jesus 110% but never to repent.

Now if that's us and may I say if that is us we're actually delighted you are here today then Jesus wants us to know we have had the sign that will be given. He's been raised from the dead and we have his teaching in the Bible and according to Jesus that is enough there won't be anything else. The compassion of God in a world class city but it is a compassion that warns us that a failure to take the trouble to listen to Jesus and to turn to repentance brings the condemnation of both Jesus and the Ninevites.

[21:19] The compassion of God and a world class city. Secondly the compassionate Christian and a world class city and then after that we'll take time for questions.

Because of course as we see the compassion of God well we're about to ask the question aren't we well how can I show God's compassion to the world class city in which we live? What's it look like for those of us who are Christians to be compassionate people in the world class city in which God has placed us?

Well first of all we are to ensure that God's word is heard. We are to ensure that God's word is heard. Because back in Jonah chapter 3 on page 936 if you've lost it as I had.

We see God's compassion don't we in that he sends someone with his word the powerful word of God. After all Jonah himself could not have cut a very impressive figure could he as he stag as he staggers a bleached figure making his way towards this great metropolis.

Yet as we said already in Jonah chapter 3 verse 5 the response is extraordinary. It's clearly not because of Jonah is it? No it's because God's word is powerful.

[22 : 47] Presumably that's why we're not told that the people in Nineveh believe Jonah but that they believed God in verse 5. Because of course to hear the word of God is to hear God himself.

Similarly in verse 6 rather than being told that the message of Jonah reached the king we're told the word of God reached the king. Here then is the dynamic word of God that changes lives.

You see how people come to repent as the Ninevites did. Well not by seeing the kind of signs that the religious leaders of Jesus' day were demanding but by hearing God's word which testifies to the sign of Jonah the sign Jesus Christ who died and has been raised from the dead.

By hearing God's word which caused them to repent a word that is supremely powerful. It's just what the apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 10 verse 17 I'll put it down there on the outline faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.

It follows therefore doesn't it that one of the hallmarks of Christian compassion is that we want to ensure that God's word is heard. It is the compassionate Christian that wants to do that. It's why for example we try and make sure that every Sunday here at Grace Church is very much for everyone whoever you are you're thoroughly welcome.

[24 : 22] And I take it too that as individuals we want to do everything we can to make sure that those we know who don't know Jesus Christ that they come and hear God's word.

Now that may be by inviting friends along to Grace Church on a Sunday. It may simply be by explaining God's word over a cup of coffee and a sandwich. The compassionate Christian will ensure that God's word is heard.

But secondly the compassionate Christian will warn of God's coming judgments as both Jonah did and Jesus did. Because of course the heart of the Christian message is that it is about a rescue.

It is about rescue from the judgment to come. It's not a message that will all be well on that day or we just need to try a bit harder or that each of us should simply follow our own spiritual instincts.

No it is about rescue from the judgment to come. And so God in his compassion sends a prophet to warn of judgments and in just the same way the mark of the compassionate Christian today I take it is that we are prepared to warn people of the judgment to come.

[25 : 30] Again that's a sign of Jonah isn't it? A message of judgment spoken with the authority of a man raised from the dead. Now I take it that to do that won't be a popular thing.

I take it it may be thought of as being very un-British. It's certainly not the normal topic of conversation at the golf club or by the coffee machine at work. I take it that our culture won't want to hear it. I take it that sadly churches which are enslaved to the culture will not proclaim it.

But behind the message of judgment is a compassionate purpose. That is the key thing to hold on to. And we see it so clearly don't we in Jonah chapter 3. Behind the message of judgment is a compassionate purpose.

God wants people to come to their senses and to repent. Which means of course that if we fail to speak of God's judgments then we are in danger of frustrating the compassionate purpose of God.

Now that is not how we instinctively think is it? But it is the truly compassionate Christian who speaks of God's judgment and in so doing becomes an instrument of God's compassion.

[26 : 54] Thirdly the compassionate Christian in a world class city will trust God's compassion. Will trust God's compassion. Because of course the fact that God is compassionate means he is not impotent.

He does not simply stand there and do nothing. There was a wonderful story in the papers a couple of weeks ago about the son of a former leader of the Palestinian militant group Hamas who had become a Christian.

Before he became a Christian he was called Massab Hassan Yousef. He is now known as Joseph. But he is the son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef who has spent more than a decade in Israeli prisons.

He says he became interested in Christianity after meeting a British missionary nine years ago.

Now as I read that story I thought to myself well I think if I had been that missionary I am not quite sure I would have ever thought that the son of a Palestinian terrorist whose father had spent ten years in Israeli prisons could ever become a Christian.

But then I realised that is probably because I hadn't factored in the fact that God is a compassionate God. A God whose compassion can reach anyone.

[28 : 17] Massab Hassan Yousef the king of Nineveh that neighbour or colleague of ours. So let me ask how are we going to use this event that's coming up Love's Last Appeal in three weeks' time on the 5th of October.

It seems to me we can get ourselves in such pickles can't we about who we're going to invite to an event like that. We can find ourselves asking all sorts of questions. Do I know them well enough to invite them? Will they like the preacher?

Is it the right time to invite them? As if whether or not they repent depends entirely on us and how we play things.

Or it may be that we simply don't think people will come or that if they do they will object the message out of hand. And I guess that is my danger. But I take it that if we truly believe that God is compassionate it will be a great spur to invite people.

After all the Ninevites were the sworn enemies of God's people. Humanly speaking they were the most unlikely people to repent. that God is wonderfully gracious and compassionate.

[29 : 40] A huge encouragement I take it to invite anyone and everyone to hear the message of Jesus. Why don't we pray and then as usual we can take questions.

Let's pray together. when God saw what they did how they turned from their evil way God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them and he did not do it.

Heavenly Father we praise you this morning that you are a compassionate God. Thank you for the extraordinary way in which we see your compassion on this great city as you relented and did not send the disaster you said you would send to them as they were spared your judgment.

As Heavenly Father we praise you for your even greater compassion in the Lord Jesus Christ. We praise you for his death and resurrection. Thank you for the promise of forgiveness. Thank you for the promise of new life in him.

And we pray Heavenly Father that you would enable us to be instruments of your compassion in the world in which you have placed us. And we ask it for Jesus sake.

[31 : 10] Amen.