

Sermon 5 July 2009

Subject: Jonah chapter 4,1-11, Jonah and the worm

Dear Parishioners

All of you probably know the story of the prophet Jonah who was swallowed by a big whale because he wanted to flee from God's calling to make the people of the city of Nineveh repent. Children especially love this story and it is indeed a Bible story that once you have heard it you cannot forget it. Since my childhood I still have a vivid picture of the big whale in my mind, which saves Jonah from the stormy sea and in the end – after Jonah's heart-breaking prayers to God – spits him out onto the shore. What an amazing tale with such strong images! But did you know the second part to that story which we have heard today in the reading of the Scripture? This part is much less known than Jonah and the big and impressive whale. It is the story of Jonah and the tiny little worm. And I have to admit that I am truly fond of this part of the story. Actually, this is I believe a great piece of literature that we find here in the Old Testament. There are so many aspects to this story, so many details and anecdotes that make it speak to us in various different ways. Let me just quickly recall what actually happens.

The big prophet Jonah is disappointed: Finally he has overcome his fear and has done what God wanted him to do and went to the people of Nineveh and told them off. He asked them to repent and to turn to God again. He announced that otherwise they would all be destroyed. He did really well, he managed to stand up in front of them and to give a great prophetic speech. The people of Nineveh were impressed – and they truly regretted their lifestyle and they repented. So God had compassion for them and he therefore spared them. In chapter 4 Jonah is in a place east of the city and builds himself a shelter so he can see what might happen to the city. Quite understandably after all the effort he has made he is not very pleased when he realizes nothing is going to happen or at least not what he has expected to happen. After a while he gets quite annoyed and he starts to argue with God: "God, did I not tell you this before – I knew that you are too gracious and too compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love – I knew you would never do anything to those people. You made a fool of me, I should never have gone there in the first place." Can you all hear

how angry Jonah is with God? Maybe he is also a little bit angry with himself, we don't know. I can vividly imagine how he is sitting there near his shed, completely absorbed by his own sufferings and probably telling himself what a poor prophet he actually is. He does not look up or down, he is just staring at Nineveh hoping that finally everybody would see that his prophecy is actually a true one and that God would punish the people there for their misbehavior. But nothing happens. Suddenly there is a turning point in the story. God decides to provide Jonah with a plant to give him shade. There are different translations of what sort of plant it might be. The New International Bible suggests it is a vine, in the King James Version they translate it as "gourd", whereas in the German versions they generally suggest it is a castor-oil plant. Whatever plant it might be, it certainly has to be a plant that grows very quickly. Because it says in the story that it grows in only one night and that it manages to rise above Jonah's head. So Jonah can sit in the shade and he is of course very happy about that indeed. Probably he thinks, well God is actually quite a good God, isn't he? He seems to care for me after all and maybe life is not that bad if I think about it again. He is so pleased sitting there under the tree and has probably a big smile on his face. But we all know his smile is not meant to last for long. For God decides to provide a little worm. The worm's mission is to start eating the roots of the plant, so the plant will be destroyed and this is how it happens. And there we go again: Jonah is *very* angry with God and he starts arguing with him once more. This time he is not only angry but even sad so that he speaks to God: "It would be better for me to die than to live."

That's a very strong and meaningful sentence, isn't it? Jonah is truly desperate, he doesn't know which way to turn. He feels strongly that his life is not worth anything any more. He wants to throw his poor little life away, because it probably seems to him that he doesn't have the strength to continue like this. In this very moment he doesn't manage to turn away from himself and his difficult situation. Therefore his wish to die is strong and genuine he doesn't see a way out. From our perspective such a reaction might seem a bit exaggerated – the whole thing just because of a dead plant! I don't know how you feel about Jonah – do you think his behavior is ridiculous? I don't think so and somehow I feel for him and in some respect he even makes me smile. He is such a stubborn prophet who dares to argue with God and on the other hand he is a person full of self-pity and somehow he is so

desperate. This latter part of him makes me feel deeply for him. I think in some way or the other we can all comprehend the situation Jonah is in. Be it because of our own experience or because of what we have seen with others. Therefore I think Jonah is a figure to like and to a certain extent someone that we can identify ourselves with.

Still one question remains for me: How did it come about that such a powerful prophet as Jonah would suddenly become a person full of despair, not knowing what to do with his life? He is actually a very successful prophet who speaks so impressively that the people of Nineveh repent. So he is a great person respected by many - how did it happen that he feels so small all of a sudden? Why can he not see his success, but is trapped in his mood of despair? In German there is an expression that says: "Wo ist bei Jonah der Wurm drin?" Which might be translated as: "Where is the jinx in Jona's situation?" We heard in the story the reason for his great sadness is a tiny little worm that changed Jonah's mood from great happiness into deep sadness. So the question remains: "What happened?"

First of all, we have to understand what the tree, that grows so fast, stands for in the story. Of course there are uncountable symbolic meanings for a tree. In this story I would like to look at the tree as a symbol for all the gifts that have been given to Jonah. I'm not only thinking of the shade that the tree provides but also the gifts that Jonah himself has received from God. He must have been a talented man with the great gift of prophecy. He is also a man of intelligence who is capable of arguing with God. Probably he has many more skills that we don't even know about and they are all gifts given by God. Jonah doesn't have to do anything to receive them, he simply has them. Just like the tree that grows and that he didn't have to plant or water or do anything to make it grow quicker. The tree is a complete gift. But the problem starts for Jonah when he realizes that the gifts he has received can be taken from him from one minute to the other. In the worst scenario it only needs a little worm to bring him completely off balance. He falls from high to very low, from top to bottom. Gifts that he has taken for granted are all of a sudden gone – no wonder that he feels very low at this point of his life. There is a saying that claims: We only realize the value of something we had when it is actually gone. This also seems to apply to Jonah. It looks like he is used to things happening in the way he wants them to happen he is used to

success. He wants to have his way - always, but now he has to face the inconvenient truth that God is in charge. This makes him furious. I'm actually quite relieved to see that he is experiencing this kind of feeling. This means that he is willing to fight even if it means to fight with God. Even though he is feeling low he still has the energy to be furious and therefore to argue with God.

Now God's reaction to Jonah's attempt for a fight is for me one crucial point in this story. God just asks him one simple question: "Have you any right to be angry?" Of course Jonah thinks that he has the right to be angry, and this question makes him even more angry, he replies: "I am angry enough to die!" Now God has mercy on him and tries to explain why he wants to spare the people of Nineveh. They are so precious to him that he feels deep compassion for them. The end of the story leaves it open whether Jonah is finally ready to understand why things have happened in the way they have. Maybe he is never able to fully acknowledge God's way. Surprisingly Jonah gives the answer to his questions already in the very beginning of chapter 4. There he points out: "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." So actually he *knows* that God is a good God, who cares for his people. Jonah recognizes that this is true for how God treats the people of Nineveh, but can he finally accept that this is also true for his own personal life? This, we shall never know.

This is also the point where I see the challenge for us readers today. That we try to understand God's graciousness and the fact that the gifts that we have are actually not our own but they are given to us and can be taken from us at any point in our lives. That's quite a difficult lesson to learn, I suppose. And also with the open ending as to whether we will manage to accept God's abounding love.

Amen