

Thought for the Week 29th June 2020

As I am writing this Thought for the Week the Met Office has issued a yellow warning for Thunderstorms affecting the western half of the British Isles over the next few days. While we rarely experience the devastating hurricanes and tornadoes that affect other parts of the world, but a severe storm with gusting winds can be a frightening experience. My worst experience of a storm happened many years ago, when our daughter was just a baby. We hired a touring caravan and set off for a few days along the west coast of Ireland towards the end of July. We booked into the Rosses Point Caravan & Camping Park near Sligo for 2 nights. It was a beautiful place on a headland overlooking a sandy beach, and the sun set on a lovely evening. However, around midnight the wind started to rise and before long our little caravan was beginning to rock a bit. I moved the car to the windward side of the van as the wind got stronger and stronger – which proved to be a good move. Needless to say, Judith was the only one who slept as the wind got stronger and stronger and the caravan rocked more violently. As I looked out the window, I saw large tents being completely blown away and families running for shelter in the toilets. Then I saw a large touring caravan up on the headland being turned over on top of the Range Rover parked beside it. Eventually the storm subsided and mercifully we suffered no damage, though even some static caravans were turned over or moved that night. We left the next morning and headed inland to a very sheltered site at Lough Key Forest Park near Boyle as the RTE News informed us that record wind speeds had been recorded at Malin Head that night!

Whether or not we have that sort of experience, all of us at some time or other have faced storms in life. Indeed, over the past few months of the coronavirus pandemic many people have faced a stormy time – and it's not all over yet. So today I want us to think for a few minutes today about a character from the bible who faced storms in his life. The story of Jonah is well-known, but here's a reminder from chapter 1 of the Old Testament book of Jonah.

1 One day the LORD told Jonah, the son of Amittai, ² to go to the great city of Nineveh^[a] and say to the people, "The LORD has seen your terrible sins. You are doomed!" ³ Instead, Jonah ran from the LORD. He went to the seaport of Joppa and bought a ticket on a ship that was going to Spain. Then he got on the ship and sailed away to escape. ⁴ But the LORD made a strong wind blow, and such a bad storm came up that the ship was about to be broken to pieces. ⁵ The sailors were frightened, and they all started praying to their gods. They even threw the ship's cargo overboard to make the ship lighter. All this time, Jonah was down below deck, sound asleep. ⁶ The ship's captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up and pray to your God! Maybe he will have pity on us and keep us from drowning." ⁷ Finally, the sailors got together and said, "Let's ask our gods to show us^[b] who caused all this trouble." It turned out to be Jonah. ⁸ They started asking him, "Are you the one who brought all this trouble on us? What business are you in? Where do you come from? What is your country? Who are your people?" ⁹ Jonah answered, "I'm a Hebrew, and I worship the LORD God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." ¹⁰ When the sailors heard this, they were frightened, because Jonah had already told them he was running from the LORD. Then they said, "Do you know what you have done?" ¹¹ The storm kept getting worse, until finally the sailors asked him, "What should we do with you to make the sea calm down?" ¹² Jonah told them, "Throw me into the sea, and it will calm down. I'm the cause of this terrible storm." ¹³ The sailors tried their best to row to the shore. But they could not do it, and the storm kept getting worse every minute. ¹⁴ So they prayed to the LORD, "Please don't let us drown for taking this man's life. Don't hold us guilty for killing an innocent man. All of this happened because you wanted it to." ¹⁵ Then they threw Jonah overboard, and the sea calmed down. ¹⁶ The sailors were so terrified that they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made all kinds of promises. ¹⁷ The LORD sent a big fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.

The first thing we see in this story is DISOBEDIENCE. Jonah was running away from God. He was in the middle of a storm in his life – but it was a storm of his own making. You know sometimes we bring storms upon ourselves and sometimes we even make the worse by the way we react to them. Jonah had been called by God to act as a prophet – bringing God’s message to the people. His ministry came at a time when Israel had split into two kingdoms. Jonah was a patriotic, god-fearing Jew who shared his fellow citizens love for Israel and hatred of her enemies. The most feared and hated of those enemies was the powerful Assyrian empire centred around their capital city Nineveh. They were well known for their cruelty to nations they invaded. Sometimes they blinded their captives and made sport of them. They tortured people by peeling their skin off bit by bit until they died. Jonah had every reason to fear these people and to wish them nothing but harm.

But then God instructed him to go to Nineveh and preach to them telling them to turn from their terrible sin. “But why,” thought Jonah, “should I care if God judges these evil people. That can’t be right. What if they were to heed the message and receive God’s forgiveness? They deserve God’s punishment – hell is too good for them!” And so, Jonah said what so many of us have said at some point in our lives, “No Way, Lord!” And he got into a boat headed in the opposite direction. But then in the middle of this emotional storm in his life Jonah found himself in the midst of a storm at sea. When the sailors found out that he was running away from God, they did their best to land the boat, but when it was to no avail, at Jonah’s suggestion, they threw him overboard. Immediately the sea calmed at which point we are told the sailors turned to God and worshipped him. This story is about more than a disobedient prophet and a big fish, it’s a story of mercy. In the storm, God gave mercy. God gave mercy to these unbelieving sailors and in the storms of life God gives mercy.

Not only is Jonah a DISOBEDIENT prophet, he’s now a DROWNING prophet. Thrown into the depths of the Mediterranean sea and engulfed by its waters, Jonah thought he would drown. Yet, in mercy, God sent along a living submarine to carry him to safety. Let’s not get caught up in whether or not it was a whale (which it most likely wasn’t) or how anyone could survive inside even a big fish) – the important message here is the in mercy God gave Jonah another chance and a three day lockdown without any distractions, to come to his senses and reconsider his ways. He recognised the hardness of his heart and his rebellion against God, and also the mercy of God in giving him another chance. The second chapter of the Book of Jonah is a song of praise to God for his mercy. Have a look at it sometime and see if you can put your name in where Jonah says “I.”

You know, we’re all like Jonah – we’ve all been disobedient before God. None of us can stand up and honestly say that we’ve never done anything wrong, indeed we would have to say that we’ve often deliberately and wilfully sinned, and as a result we’re estranged from God, we’ve maybe even deliberately turned our backs on him and gone in the opposite direction. And as a result we are drowning in our sin – cut off from God we’ve no hope. But the story of Jonah speaks of one of the great central truths of the bible – our God is merciful. From beginning to end the scriptures tell of God’s mercy peaking at God’s ultimate act of mercy – sending his son Jesus to be the saviour of the world, taking the punishment for our sins upon himself and dying in love in our place so that we can be forgiven and that broken relationship with God our Father can be restored. Just as Jonah had no hope until the big fish swallowed him and saved him from drowning, we have no hope unless we are saved.

Jonah realised the error of his ways and inside the fish he repented (see verse 9) and so he became a DELIVERED prophet. Jonah was vomited onto the shore by the fish and in chapter 3 we read that God called him a second time to go to Nineveh and this time he obeyed. Our God is merciful – he gives us a second chance, indeed many chances, to accept the gift of new life he offers us in Jesus.

It took a stormy experience to bring Jonah back to the Lord. What about you? Could the storms of life you are facing at present be God calling you to come to him, or maybe come back to him? Do you feel, like Jonah that you made things worse for yourself by your actions? Think what Jonah found – mercy.

And when Jonah came back to God and obeyed him and went to Nineveh and preached God’s message to the people there, they too found mercy and forgiveness from God.