

Call and Response (Jonah 1:1-12, 17)

Kerry Jacobs

Originally from New Zealand, I am a business academic at UNSW Canberra at ADFA. My faith journey began with the very conservative tradition of the open Brethren – which I guess has given me an ambivalent relationship with clergy and an over-developed opinion of my own preaching ability. I have been part of most religious traditions – from fundamentalist, through Pentecostal to high church. However, throughout my life God as always been a clear presence – although one I have sometimes ignored.

On the theme of call and response set for these reflection – If we google call and response the first thing that appears is a reference to music – where the second voice repeats or responds to the first voice. The mystery is that God seems to like call and response music – or at least in her interactions with us humans seems to enjoy engaging us in a duet. However, the challenge for me is that if I wish to engage in this music – I need to stop singing with myself and be open to the voice of God – a God who does not do my bidding and does not follow my agenda.

The story of Jonah and the whale is as much about a transformation of our understanding of God as it is about the transformation of Nineveh. Nineveh was somewhere near Mosul in modern day Iraq, was the capital of the neo-Assyrian empire and at the time of Jonah was a significant and powerful city which inventing flush toilets, door locks and the postal system. For Jonah, it was rather like being asked to go and preach judgement to Los Angeles and within 100 years the rulers of Nineveh besieged Jerusalem and took the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity.

Jonah responded – but his response was to run in the opposite direction – onto a boat and into a storm. When the sailors called him out – he faced his first transformation of understanding – the LORD was not simply the tribal deity of the Hebrews – but the GOD of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Given that – running seems pretty stupid.

Eventually Jonah made it back to dry land – through the kind assistance of a friendly whale – and Jonah learnt his second lesson – we are never really in control of the travel arrangements when we do international travel! I am sure that Sarah and Neil are being reminded of this as they walk the Camino. As in the process of pilgrimage – Gods call to Jonah to transformation and song – an invitation to a deeper and richer understanding of herself – as much as it was a call to preach to Nineveh. And Jonah's lesson was that he was not in control – that God did not work to his agenda.

You'd think that Jonah would have got with the program by this stage – but clearly not. When he got to Nineveh Jonah preached a message of judgement – not of repentance, as his God was a God of punishment and judgement. Unfortunately – at least from Jonah's point of view – the citizens of Nineveh took his message of doom and destruction seriously – repented and called on God for compassion and so God did not destroy them.

When they were not destroyed Jonah did a little dummy spit:

“life is not fair – I should have stayed at home [like he had any choice], wasn’t I right to run away – life is not fair I want to die”

So he went to sulk in the desert – where he had some difficulties with his landscape gardening.

God’s response to Jonah was

“why would I not be concerned about and willing to forgive Nineveh just because you don’t like them. Clearly, your God is too small. Any despite the fact that there are quite a number of people who are not particularly nice – there are also quite a number who are quite innocent. Get with the program!”

The strangest thing with this story is that God actually bothered with Jonah at all – Jonah clearly was a slow learner. Yet God chose to reveal something profound and significant about herself to him. So there is hope for me too! It is from the book of Jonah that the notion of repentance and forgiveness (Teshuva) was developed in Judaism. Jonah understood that his God was more than a tribal deity – but missed the briefing on God’s forgiveness that comes directly after the class on God’s judgement.

This time last year I was diagnosed with stomach cancer. In many ways experiencing Cancer was a bit like being called to preach judgement on Nineveh. No thanks God – got a pressing appointment in Tarshish this week. Dreadfully sorry. Unfortunately, denial is not a helpful response to either cancer or God’s call – and is essentially a selfish and rather pointless response. Soon it became clear that I was not on the road to Tarshish but in the belly of the Whale that is the medical system – swallowed by the process of chemo and surgery.

However, there still remains the place for anger – why me – God is not fair – or at least God does not play according to my rules. Anger was my last illusion of control. However, this was just another selfish illusion and indication that the God in my head was not the living God. God was bigger than Jonah’s judgemental tribal deity and God is bigger than my fears and my hopes.

For me the phrase repeating in my head throughout that indicated I had reached a degree of acceptance was the prayer of Jesus facing death – really God I would prefer if this cup would pass from me – but not my will but yours be done. This is also evident in Mary’s response to God highlighted by Heather last week – Mary said:

“I am God’s servant – may it be as you have said. Not my will but yours be done.”

God’s call for me was to let go of control – of my agenda and of my ideas. God’s call was to let go of a God I was in control of and accept that I do not get God, or what is left of my life, on my terms but rather on the terms set by God. As outlined by Suzie a couple of weeks ago, apart from God I can do nothing. Therefore, if I live another day or another twenty years is completely outside of my control and all I can do is to deal with my frame of mind and find a degree of acceptance. Not my will but yours be done – I am God’s servant – may it be with me as you have said.

One of my mature postgraduate students, who is the same age as me, also has cancer. He asked me if it was easier if you are a Christian. I said no and yes. No because I don’t have a simple answer and am not freed from the suffering more than anyone else and yes because

there is a hope and peace. In a sense in recognising I am not in control – I am not abandoned but God is in control and she loves me – even though I do not understand.

The fourteenth century mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart said it like this:

“God expects but one thing of you, and that is that you should come out of yourself in so far as you are a created being and let God be God in you”¹

The call and response is to get out of my head – out of my small images of God and out of my illusions of control. It is only as we begin to grasp this that we can learn to sing. We do not set the song, the rhythm or the speed but we get the chance to let God be God in us and therefore to sing with God.

¹ Colledge & McGuin (1981) Meister Eckhart, Paulist Press, p. 184