

Sermon for Epiphany 3. 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2012. Grace Church in Scarborough, Rev David Howells

\*Jonah walked into Nineveh, Repent of your ways, he said. They did. And it worked! (Jonah 3)

\*Live in a way detached from the world, this present form of the world is passing away. Says St Paul to the people of Corinth as they try to understand how you must live to live in Christ. (1 Cor 7)

\*The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news. Said Jesus as his ministry began. (Mark 1;15)

Let it all go.... And with open palms, hold God's hands.

Before coming to Grace Church I was working in "Spiritual Care" for the dying and their families in Victoria Hospice. It is a strange place to live, that community of the dying. Some went down that path very slowly, others very fast. Some had faith, others had questions and others still had no sense of anything beyond what they saw. But the path was the same, and each one, in the spirit, had to walk it. You might think it would be a sad place to work, and indeed it was. It was heart-breaking working with the families and friends. But for the dying it was mostly joyful to accompany them, and when possible help carry some of the load.

Andrea, a woman in her 60's had no visitors. She had cut off contact with one member of her family after another. "They want my money." She would say, or "They don't care, any of them." Andrea complained about our nurses, about food, about not being looked after and anything else that came to mind. I asked her to tell me who she had been in her 20's. She told delightful stories of her life as a young woman, falling in love, surviving hard times. I asked her about her family as it had unfolded, and it had been good, but always with a tendency to swerve off into acrimony and grudge holding. When I asked about the family she grew up in I heard about angry fights, alcohol and a missing father. Andrea was often tired by her illness and slipped in and out of stories and wakefulness, but over the few weeks she was with us she talked less of the horrid parts of life, on which she had a tendency to dwell, and more on the delights, the joys, the happy times. One day I suggested that her mother's angry way of dealing with pain might be a bit like the way she dealt with it too. Andrea made it very clear our conversation was over for the day! A couple of days later she let me back in, and at the end of the chat she asked if she could use a telephone. I pointed to the one beside her bed. "Free," I said, "even long distance." One of our volunteers helped her place calls to her three, scattered adult children. By the middle of the next day she was exhausted. "I spoke to them." She told me. "I told them I love them." Only one was able to get to Victoria before Andrea died, but missed the chance to talk to her consciously. Andrea seemed to let go, to relax, to allow herself to float down that stream, that river which gently carries you to death. She was peaceful, tranquil and without the abrasive edge she had had, without the tension.

Each of the readings is about Andrea. Each is about you.

All of them say, "Let go of the things you cling to, turn with empty hands to God, and let him fill you with life."

Inside each of us is a fragile hidden person. Like an inner child. The toughened, battered, worldly wise adult self protects that child. You protect yourself by being cynical about supposed kindness, because you have been let down and hurt when you should have been cared for and held. You use a sharp tongue and an angry face to keep everyone at a distance and away from any risk of tender intimacy. You use despair and tiredness as a thick padding to deaden any chance of pain, or of joy.

You build castles for defense against real or imagined attack, mostly replaying the hurts of childhood, the ones which left the scars on your heart.

Castles are great places to hide in from a hostile world, and we feel we have made this tender inner-self safe, at last.

But the difference between a castle and a prison is hard to discern after a few decades. Once the doors are rusted into place that tender self cannot get out and can hardly breathe.

But this tender inner-self is the image of God, in which each of you is made. It is the open, loving, trusting, playful, laughing, generous and delighted you who is filled with life and light.

This is the spark of the divine which God has planted in you in your mother's womb. And God never ceases to seek out his own and to try to set you free.

Andrea had so imprisoned herself, had told herself that the stories of her childhood were the stories of all life, and had so darkened her world with the shadows of the past that she had shut herself away, never to risk hurt again. The woman I met was nearly spiritually dead, with her bitterness and negativity.

In my visits with her I actually did very little. What I did do was watch as her concrete walls began to crumble, as her pieces of armour became unbuckled and as her protections and frightened reactions slowly lessened and diminished.

Andrea was "repenting". It was not that she was saying "Oh, I am so sorry! What a horrible person I have been. Woe is me!"

Repenting actually means changing the way you are, the direction you have faced in life, the attitudes that you have solidified into. It means letting go of the way you live your deep inner life. It means saying "I don't know what is going to happen next. I am vulnerable and I need someone to help me, please."

When Andrea could no longer speak, she smiled at the nurses and held their gaze as they washed her, or fed her sips of water, or gave her pain relief. She allowed me to sit and hold her hand and talk to her. She became both the woman and the little girl, well made into one person.

She was no Christian! She had too many critical stories about the church. But I think God didn't mind. God's Holy Spirit, the name that I as a Christian call her, was still at work redeeming one of the Father's special creations. That Andrea and I could not use any of the Christian language didn't mean that God was shut out by those walls. Neither Jonah nor the Ninevites were Christian either!

But as Christians we have these teachings, these revelations of truth, these guidelines for holy, whole and joyful living, now, and for the rest of our lives.

In the Hospice, it often seemed to me that people got restored to grace whether they knew the Christian words for it or not. Junk is the only thing that gets thrown away and God does not make junk. God does not waste one soul of creation. But God seems to step in at the dying, as I saw with Andrea, and countless others, only if we have not managed it for ourselves in living.

Jesus, who invites us to abundant life, says to you, Do now, while you are living, what I helped Andrea do as she was dying. Change now and live now! Come to me and I will quench that deep thirst. Come to me and I will give you life. I will feed you with my body and give you the blood of new life. I will make you a holy person, a light to the world and a blessing to all you know.

It is good news. Believe it! Turn yourself around and accept it with out walls!