

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10
Psalm 62: 6-14
I Corinthians 7: 29-31
St. Mark 1: 14-20

Epiphany 3 2024.

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.”

Jonah 3: 10

Prayer is a core practice for every Christian... We pray together Sunday by Sunday. Anglican Christians say, “If you want to know what we believe, see how we pray (or in the old Latin language, *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*”). We are encouraged to pray at least daily, to have fellowship with God through Jesus Christ...

But some people have asked, “If we are asking for God to change an outcome – for example, to make a sick person return to health, isn’t that asking God to change his mind?... God doesn’t change!... Is it right that we ask for a change in a future outcome?...”

God changing an outcome after prayer seems to be the point in the first reading this morning, from Jonah 3... Jonah records that the people of Nineveh were doing some very evil things. God sends the prophet Jonah to proclaim that God will *destroy* Nineveh within 40 days!... Verse 4: “And [Jonah prophesied], ‘Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!...”

As a result of this prophesy, though, there is widespread repentance throughout the city! The king of Nineveh puts on a sackcloth robe, and sits in ashes. Everyone – even the animals! – fast. The people were told to cry out mightily to God, so that God would show mercy on them...

After this period of prayer and lamentation, God decides that he will *not* destroy Nineveh... Verse 10: “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it...”

God *relents*... Some translations read, God *repents*... God has mercy on the people...

Doesn’t that suggest that God changes his mind, as a result of prayer?... How can this be?...

Malachi 3: 6: “For I the Lord do not change...”

Numbers 23: 19: “God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?”

Psalm 110: 4: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.”

Hebrews 13: 8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.”

James 1: 17: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

Boy – these verses sure seem to show that God does *not* change his mind!... Why then, does it say God “relents” in today’s first reading, as a result of intercessory prayer?...

I know of an ordained minister in another church (I won’t say which one). This minister said something like this to me, “I don’t think prayer makes any difference to God. Prayer is just – psychologically healthy. It’s like doing exercises, or getting a good night’s sleep...”

Can that be right? Do we want to reduce prayer to be about feeling nice about the world?... I respectfully suggest that this is an impoverished understanding of the nature of God, and of prayer...

One of the wonderful things about being a Christian is that we live within a living stream of faithful men and women in the Christian tradition. If we have a question, there is a very good chance that someone else thought about it before!... It shouldn’t surprise us, then, to learn that earlier generations thought about intercessory prayer, and God, and got some very helpful insights...

One of these earlier Christian leaders was a man named Boethius, who lived in the early 600's... Boethius was thinking about God answering prayer according to his will, and that God doesn’t change his mind. Boethius realized something very special, and very profound...

Boethius wrote something like this: As human beings, we know the present time the very best. The future is a mystery, which none of us can know... We have memory in the present, of what is going on right now... We have a pretty good memory of the recent past – perhaps we remember what we ate for breakfast this morning, for example... But the further back in time we go, the more our memory fades... Can we remember what we had for breakfast on January 21, 2020? Probably not!... There quickly comes a time when we have no memory at all – it’s *lost* to us... Part of our human limitation is that our relationship with time is fragile and incomplete...

That’s not the case with God!... God is not only eternal. God is *outside* of time. He *created* time... There never *was* a time, when God never was... God’s memory is perfect...

God knows the past and he knows the future, with even greater clarity than we can know the present... We humans are praying within the time, not knowing the future... God knows the future and is allowing it to unfold, like the conductor of a great orchestra with perfect timing and amazing harmonies!... When we are praying, seeking kingdom-building outcomes in harmony with God's will, we are actually in a beautiful dialogue with God, who is unfolding the universe in a beautiful way – including, revealing the nature of his mercy...

Of course, all our prayers are within the context of seeking God's will, and being in harmony with it... Yet, let's not be *timid* to speak with our perfect Friend, and to learn to listen acutely!... We can pour out our hearts; we can *long* for earth to become more like heaven... I respectfully suggest, it's all right to pray this way...

Let's get back to the first reading from Jonah. Let's notice the nature of God being revealed... God is *merciful*. He isn't giving the people of Nineveh the punishment they so much deserved. God's desire is always oriented toward forgiveness; and life...

As Christians, we can't help but see how God's behaviour to the people of Nineveh is not just how he looks at a city, or at a nation – but of *all* nations; *all* peoples... God's mercy toward Nineveh points ahead – to that amazing wandering Jewish rabbi who turned the world's priorities upside-down!... God's mercy toward Nineveh points ahead, to God's divine mercy shown supremely in the person of Jesus, God the Son... Jesus Christ himself was merciful beyond belief and human understanding: We nailed him to the cross – yes; he died for you and for me too! – and he pays the price we owed. He forgives, and sets *us* free...

Our best desires aren't likely to be our impulses in the moment... When we are hurt, we might want revenge. We might want God to smite our enemies so hard, they don't know what hit them!... But the Lord shows a different way – the way of mercy...

Jonah wasn't a very good prophet, really... Jonah was disobedient!... God wanted Jonah to preach to Nineveh, so Jonah tried to run the other way, and went to sea. According to the story, God had to get Jonah's attention by causing a storm, having Jonah thrown off the boat, and being swallowed alive by a big fish for 3 days! For the early Christians, and for the Lord Jesus himself, Jonah inside the big fish was a metaphor, a picture, of Jesus in the depths, between his death and his resurrection...

So, Jonah stupidly tries to run away – and when we try to run away from God, God has his ways to get our attention...

So, after this episode, the grumpy and reluctant prophet Jonah goes and preaches to Nineveh. Then, he gets ready for God to wipe out Nineveh...

Then, much to Jonah's anger and frustration, God has mercy on Nineveh! After this, Jonah goes out into the desert to sulk, like a spoiled little boy... God even has to get Jonah's attention in the dessert, by briefly offering a plant for shade. Jonah cared about the plant; shouldn't God care for his wayward people?...

Again and again, we are reminded in Jonah that God isn't around to suit *our* agenda. God is being true to his own nature – most clearly here, his nature to be merciful...

May we pray fervently, in confession and lament, in praise and thanksgiving – and in supplication for ourselves and in intercession for others... Above all, may we seek our prayers to be unfolded within God's perfect promises... May we humbly and gratefully recognize God's mercy, shown supremely through his Son, Jesus Christ. Lastly, may we not be reluctant prophets in our generation, but live boldly for the Lord! To him belongs all honour and glory, world without end.

Amen.