**PRIORITIES Jonah 3:1-10, I Cor 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20**

It was the Rugby League Grand Final between the Rabitohs and the Bulldogs. Given the Rabbitoh hadn’t made a grand final in 43 years, the stadium was *packed!* A diehard fan, surprised to see an empty seat next to him, remarked about it to the woman sitting on the other side of it.

"It was my husband's seat," the woman explained, "But he died."

"Oh. I'm very sorry," said the man. "But I must say I'm really surprised that another relative, or friend, didn't jump at the chance to come with you and use the seat!”

"Beats me," said the woman. "They all insisted on going to the funeral."

Interesting priorities.

All three readings today speak about priorities – God’s priorities, and our priorities, and how they interact.

Let’s look at Jonah first. Most of us will know the story: God called Jonah to go and preach against the city of Nineveh. Jonah absolutely did NOT want to do that! For starters, Nineveh was a Gentile city so to Jonah and his fellow Jews, it was a disgusting place! Though in Jonah’s opinion Nineveh deserved to wiped from the face of the earth, he suspected that he very fact that God was taking time to deal with them indicated that he might spare them if they repented, and there was *no way* Jonah wanted any part in their redemption.

So he took off in the opposite direction and boarded a boat for Tarshish. God caught up with him, brought him to his senses via a nasty storm and being ingested by a whale, until finally Jonah in his desperation to be spared from death, agreed to do what God said.

The story continues with today’s reading…..

**V1** Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

"Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

God’s priority was to bring salvation to the city of Nineveh. He wanted them to repent of their evil ways, so that he could spare them and save them. He went to a great deal of trouble to bring that about.

Despite the fact that Jonah’s own priorities were contrary to God’s, God persevered, both with Jonah, and with the city of Nineveh, until his will was accomplished.

The outcome for Nineveh? We read in v 10: “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.”

We need to be careful not to allow our own prejudices and judgments stand in the way of what God wishes to accomplish.

It might be good to stop and ask ourselves occasionally, whether we are operating with any prejudice in our own lives. For example, are there people we won’t associate with because we disapprove of them? Perhaps their lifestyle or their political stance or their religious beliefs - or lack of them - offend us?

When Jay and I were planning our wedding, he asked a very dark Nigerian friend called Titus to be his best man. I asked my cousin Vivienne to be my Maid of Honour. Vivienne, like the rest of my family, was South African. When my dad found out, he took me aside and said, “You need to ask Jay to get someone else to be best man, or you need to change your chief bridesmaid.” He went on to explain that Vivienne’s family would find it difficult for her to be partnered in the wedding by a black man. So we did a swap, so as not to cause offence.

Sometimes, prejudice is not as obvious as we might think. It is good spiritual practice to do some soul searching from time to time, around our most passionate beliefs – and ask ourselves whether we are ever choosey in our dealings with people we disagree with? If we are, it may be that we are preventing God from touching someone through us.

So much can happen, and happen powerfully, when God’s people are in line with God’s plan. God chooses to work through us, and there are times when he will delay his purposes to bring a recalcitrant servant around (as he did with Jonah) – but it does waste precious time.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians picks up on this theme:

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

When Paul says time is short, he’s referring to the return of Jesus. 1st century believers lived in expectation that Christ would return any minute – certainly within their lifetime – and it put a completely different perspective on their lives. We need to read this passage in its context to fully understand it. Paul is not suggesting that married people should separate, or that we should deny our emotions, or that we should divest ourselves of our possessions. Essentially what Paul is saying is that we should not allow matters of everyday life to distract us from God’s priorities, because there is so little time left on this earth.

I think that sadly, we have lost that sense of urgency today.

In Hebrews 12:1, Paul puts this thought even more clearly. He says, “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Paul is encouraging us to reflect and to *be aware* of the things in our lives which get in the way of us living according to God’s priorities.

**So what are God’s priorities?** We find them spelled out throughout the Scriptures, but today’s Gospel reading is a passage that puts it very succinctly.

 Jesus says in v 15: "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

 **There’s priority number 1**. Repent – turn away from your sin and turn back to God. And then believe the good news! -The news that Jesus has come to make it possible to be friends with God.

**Priority number 2**  is in v 17. “Come, follow me!” said Jesus.

First, God wants us in a relationship with him. He wants our sin dealt with, and our faith firmly placed in him.

Secondly, he wants us to leave everything and follow him - not necessarily physically - but in the sense that we lose out attachment to those earthly things that would hold us back from doing his will. This is exactly where Paul was coming from in his words to the Corinthian believers.

**To follow Jesus – to *really* follow Jesus – means a shifting of our priorities.**

To really follow Jesus means that he becomes more important to us than our prejudices. God worked with Jonah on that one – he wanted Jonah to see that he wanted the Gentiles to believe and be saved as well as the Jews.

To really follow Jesus means he becomes more important to us than our personal passions. Are there things in our lives that we allow to take up all our time and energy, so we don’t have much left for God?

To really follow Jesus means that we must lay aside *ourselves* and our tendency to look after number one before we look after others. That’s a particular challenge when it comes to spending money. I often personally wrestle with spending money on myself for luxuries, when I know that there are others within reasonably close proximity, that don’t have funds for more basic needs. I guess we need to strike a balance there – but it helps to do a spiritual reality check from time to time.

To reallyfollow Jesus, means he becomes more important to us than our earthly relationships . How easy it is – under the heading of ‘family commitments’ - to make our earthly relationships the centre of our world, leaving God on the fringe. Again, there is discernment to be exercised here. A truly committed follower of Jesus will love, honour and support his or her family – but we always need to remain aware of the importance of Jesus and his Church in our lives.

To really follow Jesus, he must be the most important reality in our lives.

**And finally, in this passage from Mark this morning, there is a resounding 3rd­­ priority.** It’s in the second part of verse 17. “come follow me,” said Jesus, *“and I will make you fishers of men.”*

Fishers of men - fishers of people. Jesus’ greatest passion was to bring people into the Kingdom of God: To introduce them to the Father. His methods were brilliant. Jesus didn’t just preach at people. He was the incarnation of the Father on earth. When Jesus touched people’s lives by loving them, healing them, encouraging them, & teaching them; when he had compassion on the poor and the alien and the outcast – he was touching them with the Father’s love.

We too are called to be fishers of people. Our greatest priority also should be to introduce them to the Father. It’s as we follow our Lord’s example - as we allow Jesus to love people through us – that we too are touching them with the Father’s love.

So as we move into 2015 - how are our priorities?

Are we giving pride of place in our lives to those things which are at the heart of the Gospel – or are we filling our lives all sorts of other things which have the ability to crowd out the priorities God has called us to embrace?

-Something to for our prayer and reflection this week.

Let’s pray