**Sunday 24th January 2021(3rd Sunday after the Epiphany)**

Welcome to this service of the Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership. I am Neil Carter and worship at Greenmount URC.

**Call to Worship**

Let us come from our everyday and our routine and meet with God – the one who made us, and who gave us our daily bread through the week just gone.

**Let us pray.**

Loving Lord,  
thank you that you meet us where we are,  
in the middle and muddle of our daily tasks.  
Help us to hear your call,  
to recognise your voice,  
and to respond to your invitation  
to be with you now.  
**Amen.**

**Hymn: Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,**

Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,

whose trust, ever child-like, no cares could destroy,

be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,

your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.

Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,

whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,

be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,

your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.

Lord of all kindliness, Lord of all grace,

your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,

be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,

your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.

Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,

whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,

be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,

your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.

JAN STRUTHER' (1901-53)

**Let us join in prayer in this series of prayers.**

The Lord called the disciples to be fishers of men.  
He calls us to follow him, to trust in, rely on and have confidence in him.  
Come, let us cast our nets into his waters and offer ourselves in worship and praise.  
**Amen.**

Our second prayer is a prayer of thanks with actions – please join in.

Thank you, Lord,  
that when it is stormy all around us, (*wave hands vigorously*)  
your love is changeless. (*hands over heart*)  
  
Thank you, Lord,  
that although we are broken people, (*mime pushing people away*)  
your love is changeless. (*hands over heart*)  
  
Thank you, Lord,  
that your compassion overwhelms us, (*hold fists out in front of you*)  
and your love is changeless. (*hands over heart*)  
**Amen.**

We thank you, Lord, for all these blessings caught in your net of good news.  
Thank you for the changes you have brought about in our lives,  
and the difference you continue to make as we follow and learn from you.

Thank you that you never ask us to go beyond our capabilities.  
Thank you for the many blessings we receive when we follow through on what you ask of us.  
May we be a blessing to others in your name, by spreading the good news.  
**Amen.**

**Finally let us join in saying The Lord’s Prayer.**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

**OT Reading Jonah 3 v 1-5, 10**

**Reflection 1 Tuesday morning in the study.**

It is clear to me that I must write the reflection on Jonah chapter 3. I have read the text, looked it up in a commentary, prayed about it and thought long and hard.

Oh dear, who’s going to read this? People across the missional Partnership – some I know, many I do not. What will they think? Will I get it right? What about spelling, grammar and sentence construction? Will it be relevant, worthwhile? So much to think about. So many fears.

Better get started, get the paper out. What’s best? Lined or plain? Maybe squared paper – that often helps me organise my thinking. Sorry, there will be just a few moments delay while I find the paper and tidy up the papers in the file.

Now, pen or pencil? Pencils need sharpening. Might as well sharpen all the pencils in the drawer while I’m at it.

Let’s get started. Need a title: Jonah 3 (not very catchy); Jonah travels on (ok); Jonah has a whale of a time (not the story in today’s reading); Jonah finally does what God tells him. (Better)

Ah, just noticed the time – coffee!

A little delayed in getting back on track, had to send a few emails and make a phone call. Then I realised that my desk was a bit of a mess, so I tidied that, then the book shelves as well. The Christmas books needed sorting and just had to read the synopsis of a couple of them.

Just looked out of the window - a beautiful blue sky and sunshine – ideal for a walk. Maybe I should leave this and go for a healthy walk up Holcombe Hill. Probably ought to pop into the greenhouse too and check on the bulbs and have a tidy up. Back after lunch! Maybe things will be easier in the afternoon.

Had to tell myself off in no uncertain terms, I am just being a Jonah, finding every possible reason for not doing what is needed! I can’t find any more excuses so must write about our reading.

Jonah is the classic example of divine persistence. He is a faithful Israelite called to be a prophet of doom to Ninevah. He sets off in the opposite direction, meets a whale and avoids what God has told him to do.

In chapter 3 we have God’s second call to Jonah. Finally, he is obedient. However, this is a daunting task. He goes to the large city, Ninevah, capital of the Assyrian Empire, a fierce powerful people. No Israelite would want to make the journey, especially with a message of doom from God.

The end of the story is even more surprising. The people of Ninevah take Jonah’s message seriously and repent at once. Their lives also take a different and unexpected turn and God responds to their radical obedience by offering them a second chance, much to Jonah’s annoyance - despite his own second chance.

How often do we find many excuses or tasks to avoid listening to God’s call to us? How often do we go in the wrong direction? How frequently do we fail God and need a second chance?

Let us in this new year be willing listeners to God. Ready to do directly what is asked of us. Rejoice in serving God day by day.

(And the pencils are sharp, paper, desk and shelves tidied! Had a good walk and the bulbs in the greenhouse watered).

**Hymn Follow him, follow him, yield your life to him,**

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| *Follow him, follow him, yield your life to him,*  *he has conquered death, he is King of kings.*  *Accept the joy which he gives to those*  *who yield their lives to him.*  I WANT to walk with Jesus Christ  all the days I live of this life on earth,  to give to him complete control  of body and of soul:  I want to learn to speak to him,  to pray to him, confess my sin,  to open my life and let him in,  for joy will then be mine: | I want to learn to read his word,  for this is how I know the way,  to live my life as pleases him,  in holiness and joy:  I want to learn to speak of him;  my life must show that he lives in me,  my deeds, my thoughts, my words must speak  of all his love for me:  O holy Spirit of the Lord,  enter now into this heart of mine,  take full control of my selfish will  and make me wholly thine:  C. SIMMONDS. 1964\* |

**Reading: Mark 1, 14 - 20**

**Reflection 2**

In complete contrast to Jonah here we have Simon and his brother Andrew, James and John immediately doing what Jesus asked of them. They leave their work as fishermen, trust in the good news and their unhesitating response is to follow a new path.

They abandon their way of making a living, their families and their friends. Fishermen would be hard working, tough, realistic men who would have experienced the real world, yet they are willing to follow Jesus, not knowing where it would lead. Indeed, since John had been arrested, they would have some fear that this could be their fate as well.

Jesus and the disciples start fishing for people. They had no idea where the journey would take them but it was the beginning of something radically different.

When I read this passage, I thought I was the wrong person to preach about it as I’m one of those people who finds it difficult to make radical decisions.

I lived in Sheffield for 20 years, now in Bury for over 40

Married for over 40 years

Taught in the same school for 30+ years

Worshipped in the same church for 42 years

Have even been church secretary for over 30 years

Changes in direction in life for me have not been numerous. But when I look back, I think I can see times when God has directed me, sometimes against my will, to the place he has wanted me to be and the role he has wanted me to take. It is in submitting as these disciples did to God’s direction which is important, not the extremes of the journey.

The fishermen were not hot-headed individuals. They were down to earth and realistic, used to making decisions to stay safe on boats. Therefore, I suspect they had listened to John’s and Jesus’ teaching, so they had some knowledge and had assessed and evaluated what they had heard. The vital point here is that Jesus then gave them a personal invitation to follow him.

I was brought up in the church and Sunday School so there was head knowledge. However, it wasn’t until as a teenager at a Crusader New Year house party that the leaders, David and Peter, made it clear that there was a decision to be made because there was a personal invitation to commit my life to God and Jesus. No body of knowledge, no amount of reading or good works was needed to give my life to him and follow him. This was indeed Good News. That invitation, made personal, changes lives; to live a life trusting God from day to day.

Looking back on my life I can see God’s hand in doors being opened and closed for me. In the places I have been, in the opportunities and the challenges which have shaped my life. I am sure if you spend a few minutes looking back you too will see where God has been active in leading and directing you and you have been willing to go in trust.

Fishermen have many skills. They need patience and the ability to endure hours in the hot sun or the cold wind. They need to notice the movement of the water that reveals the presence of the fish. They need strength to play a big fish and gentleness to land it. These are all transferable qualities. Sharing God’s message also demands patience and endurance, sensitivity to other people and careful attention to the ways of bringing them into Jesus’ presence. No wonder Jesus spoke about becoming “fishers of people”! What about other skills that people have developed over the course of their work and life? How might God make use of these as resources for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ?

I have to say if I was calling disciples, I wouldn’t look for fishermen – but good orators, writers, those with a great personality to entertain and teach. But life has taught us that people of all abilities, skills and personalities are invaluable in God’s kingdom here on earth.

It does make us think about the skills each of us has developed over our lives. How might God make use of these resources for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ? Indeed, there is no reason why new skills cannot be developed. The age-old skills of conversation, encouragement, sharing, caring, supporting, going the extra mile, have come to the fore during these difficult times. Whilst the ability to use the new technology of emails, text messaging and Zoom have become so necessary.

**Prayers of Intercession**

We pray for all who are pushed to their limits at work and at home, for Intensive Care Staff, for all in the emergency services, for GPs, teachers and school staff, for parents and students, for all whose mental health is at breaking point. We remember the shop staff, the delivery drivers and all who serve us in many different ways. We pray for our Government and all whose decisions affect millions of lives. And we pray for one another as we respond to the restrictions locally and nationally.  
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you.**

We pray for those whose businesses are closed, whose shops are locked up, whose rooms have no guests, for those whose money is running out, for those on the brink of despair. For those who have lost their jobs or live in fear that their livelihoods are about to disappear.   
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you.**

Loving God, we pray for the states of America to be united in the days and weeks ahead.  
We pray for an end to violence, for wisdom and protection for President Joe Biden. We pray for those in the police force and those entrusted with keeping the law and peace.

We remember people living in fear across the world and those in prison for their faith.   
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you.**

We pray for your church, entrusted with the good news of Jesus, and charged with serving all those in need. We pray for hospital chaplains, for those ministering to the bereaved, and for one another as we seek to share our faith and our hope in Jesus Christ.

At the end of the week of prayer for Christian Unity we pray that we may work with all churches and in particular those within our mission partnership. We pray for Richard and Daniel as they minister to us in these difficult times.  
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you. Amen.**

**Hymn Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!**

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| Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!  God's saving news to all the nations take:  proclaim Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord and King,  that all the world his glorious praise may sing.  Go forth and tell! God's love embraces all;  he will in grace respond to all who call:  how shall they call if they have never heard  the gracious invitation of his word? | Go. forth and tell! The doors are open wide:  share God's good gifts-let no one be denied;  live out your life as Christ your Lord shall choose,  your ransomed powers for his sole glory use.  Go forth and tell! O Church of God, arise!  Go in the strength which Christ your Lord supplies;  go till all nations his great name adore and serve him,  Lord and King for evermore.  JAMES E. SEDDON (1915-83)\* |

**Blessing**

As you continue on your way,

May you know that God goes before you.

By the strength of his Spirit,

Share your faith with the uncertain;

Share your love with the unlovely;

Share your presence with the lonely;

And share God with everyone,

Just as God has shared himself with you,

In the unfading blessing of Jesus Christ,

Our Lord and Saviour.

**Amen**