



At All Saints Anglican Cathedral in Juba, South Sudan this morning, the Archbishop of Canterbury preached on Jonah on the importance of forgiveness.

The Archbishop is currently on a historic three-day Pilgrimage for Peace to South Sudan with Pope Francis and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland.

Read Archbishop Justin's sermon in full:

Your Excellency, Madam Vice President, Honourable Governor of Central Equatoria, Honourable National and State Ministers, My Lords, Your Graces, sisters and brothers.

This is a story of a man with a hard heart and a man with a soft heart. Jonah did not want other people to have God's forgiveness.

The Assyrians who lived in Nineveh were at that time the most cruel people on earth. They killed without mercy. They captured cities and nations around the world. Their lives at Nineveh were morally rotten.

And so when God says to Jonah in Jonah 1, "Go to Nineveh," Jonah goes as far away on earth as possible. But we know the story. There is a storm, he is thrown into the sea, swallowed by a fish and spat out on land.

And God says to Jonah, "I told you, go to Nineveh!" And I think Jonah felt that it was more difficult to disobey God than to go to Nineveh. But his problem was not that he was afraid of Nineveh. His problem was that he was afraid that God would forgive Nineveh.

He had a hard heart. And you know he goes to Nineveh. He says "repent!" and they do. And to his horror, God forgives them.

And that is when Jonah 4 begins. He is sitting outside Nineveh consumed with anger because God has been merciful. And God says, "But these are human beings. Should I not forgive them?"

And we see the exact opposite with Jesus, the man with a soft heart, who because he is God he shows us what God is like.

And we have this problem of bad people being forgiven again and again and again in the Bible. Think of the Prodigal Son. Think of Jesus' shout as he is crucified, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

All that attitude of God is so hard for us to understand because when we are hurt, our hearts go hard. We want revenge. We don't want them forgiven. We want them to know how bad they have been.

But that is not what Jesus does. He takes off his outer clothes. He bows down at the feet of his disciples and He washes their feet. He washes the feet of Judas who will betray him. He washes the feet of Peter who will deny him. He washes the feet of the other disciples who will run away from Him.

In 2019, working with the Pope and the Moderator of Scotland, we invited the political and religious leaders of South Sudan to a retreat in the Vatican.

It was very tough as they sat we talked to them and they shared with each other. And the Pope when he spoke to them at the end of his talk about sitting in front of the face of Jesus, looking into the eyes of Jesus, got up, walked around to the leaders, the political leaders, got down on his knees and kissed their feet, saying, "I beg you make peace." I think my dear brother, His Grace, you remember the emotion?

There were tears. They tried to stop him. He could hardly walk because of his bad legs. It cost him pain. That is because his heart is full of Jesus. He has a soft heart.

So how do we have a soft heart?

We recognise that judgement is for God. None of us will escape God's judgement. God often judges us by giving us what we choose. If we choose to be dishonest, he gives us a life of dishonesty with all the insecurity and fear that that brings - especially when we come to the end of our life, and we know that next, we will face God.

I know that I said this last week to some Members of Parliament who had summoned me to criticise me - and I told them that their criticism was less important to me than the judgement of God.

In the stories we read in the Bible, it is the oppressed who are comforted, not the oppressors. It is the unimportant in the world's eyes that Jesus cares for. It is the unimportant in the world's eyes that Jesus loves.

But there is a scandal in the Gospel. The scandal is that God forgives sinners. It's a strange scandal because we know we are all sinners and we know that we can be forgiven in the grace of God, because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. But isn't there something strange, deep inside us, that says, "Yes, God, forgive me. But don't forgive him!" Do you know that feeling?

And another story. At the end of World War Two there was a trial of the leaders from Germany who had killed so many million people. And there was a chaplain from Canada who was called by his general, he was an army chaplain, and the general said to him, "I want you to be the chaplain to the prisoners who are being tried for their cruelty."

Now the chaplain's son had been killed in the war by the Germans, and he wrote afterwards that everything in him said, "No"! But God said, "Yes"! And one of those prisoners had been in charge of a camp where more than a million people had been killed. And during the trial, and in the weeks before that man's execution the chaplain showed him the way to Christ, and he came to Christ.

Do you realise that we will be in heaven with that man? Many people in this world would say, "That is a scandal! How can God be so unjust to forgive that man?" And the answer is in one word: Jesus.

So we live with and serve a God whose compassion and love and forgiveness are endless. God does not say, "Sin does not matter." It matters enough for God to give his son on the cross. We worship a crucified God. But his grace is not limited, nor is it divided between us.

We have five children. And when they have a birthday, there is a cake. And sometimes there's not much cake there. And when they were little, you could see that they were thinking, is my brother going to get more cake than me? Or why did my little sister do better than I did?

Grace is not like that cake. The more grace He gives me, the more grace there is. Our enemies are not taking forgiveness from us when they turn to Christ and are forgiven. If someone is closer to God than you, it does not mean you are further away.

Jesus knew this. He knew that washing the disciples' feet did not mean that he was less than them. And he knew the disciples' hearts as he washed the dirt off their feet. He knew some were thinking oh, I am really important, and others were thinking I am too unclean inside. If Jesus knew that, he would not love me .

And both are wrong. Jesus knew the truth about all of them. And he knows the truth about every person here. He knows my worst thoughts and your worst thoughts and his love for us is unlimited. And when we hear that, we know that we are free in Christ. When our enemy turns to God, we are blessed. When God forgives someone else, we are joyful, because we remember that shows he forgives us.

God sees and knows the great pain and injustice in South Sudan. He knows how the women suffer. He knows how that children are killed. He knows the heart of the fighter that goes into battle, terrified. But he also sees the heart of the one who is cruel and corrupt. He comes to everyone in South Sudan, as he comes to Jonah. And with a question - are you angry because I forgive? And as he asks a question to Peter - do you love me?

We don't know how the book of Jonah ends. Was Jonah responsive to God's compassion? We don't know if the elder brother in the prodigal son came in and was reconciled with his brother. But we know that in Jesus, we have a response over which God rejoices. For God says about Jesus, this is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.

This weekend is an extraordinary moment. For 500 years, Protestants, Anglicans, and Catholics have not worked together at a global level. But after the Pope was helped up from his knees in 2019, and we were talking later, we felt that God was calling us to go to South Sudan and to do something that had not ever happened before.

This weekend in the history of the church will be remembered. Because of the unity of Christians. And you heard Jesus say in that beautifully read second reading "by this will all people know you are my disciples that you love one another."

Whoever you are here, whatever you've done in your life, if there are secret crimes and evil deeds that nobody else knows, God knows your heart, and he kneels before you - God in Jesus kneels before you, and he says - will you let me wash you? And when he washes us, we are changed.

My heart breaks I can hardly speak with sorrow for South Sudan. I beg that at every level, from the President to the smallest child, that people find the mercy of God and are transformed. And there is peace, and good government. That no one steals money, that no one kills the neighbour

for cattle.

When Judas goes out, John writes, and it was night. There is a darkness over South Sudan and many other countries in this world. But in John chapter one, he says, the light is not overcome by the darkness.

The people of Christ are the light of this nation. If South Sudan finds peace, the world will find hope.

The women in Congo will rejoice if you find peace. The refugees in Myanmar will rejoice if you find peace. The soldiers in Ukraine will rejoice if you find peace. Because you will show that God is great. With God, South Sudan has hope, and that hope is when its people take courage, and the courage is to live the scandalous gospel of the infinite love of Christ.

9 min read

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