

May these words be pleasing. Amen

I realised there was something wrong with my tooth last Sunday. It just wasn't right. It seemed to me to be breaking, it was a little sore, and as the week began it was starting to be quite painful. I rang the dentist and managed to get an appointment, just to have a look at it; and I got a slot to go in on Wednesday, rather pleasingly at two thirty.

Have you ever made a mistake and someone else suffers? I often seem to manage to do this and it's not a great feeling when it happens. On Wednesday I was almost relieved that it was someone else who had made the mistake. It went like this: Nowadays, at the dentist, one stands outside and waits to be called in. The sign says there is no need to knock, someone will come and get you. On Wednesday I arrived on time, at two thirty, it was quite cold, and it was raining. Sadly, therefore, I was not called in *immediately*. It was good to talk to others outside before they, each in turn, were called in. I was not. By quarter past three, in the rain, I rang the dentist (thank goodness for mobile phones). Was there a problem? It turned out that someone had mistakenly put me into the book on the wrong Wednesday. I was ushered in, cold and very wet. A dentist was found who sat me down but even then did not see me *immediately*. Instead she fussed over my notes and discussed them with the nurse whilst simultaneously discussing who had made the mistake. She eventually came across and warned that, if there was a problem with the tooth, a different appointment would need to be made and this could be in a few week's time. My feeling was that this a bit more *immediate*. Finally she looked into my mouth and there was an 'ah' and a 'hmm'. *Immediately* arrangements were made, the tooth taken out, on Friday.

There's something of the *immediate* in today's readings and they point us to the immense and immediate love of God both into the next life but also *now*. We start with the short, pacey, story of Jonah, Jonah and the whale. It is a story full of silliness and nonsense but it challenges us to choose: Consider the bigger story of God – is *this* silly, or is the nonsensical love of God actually real and *immediate*?

How well do we remember the story of Jonah? God sends his prophet, his spokesman, on a mission. He sends Jonah to a godless nation of foreigners, up in Ninevah. In OT times this was unbelievable – why would the prophet of God be sent to the enemies of God? That's silly. The prophet Jonah, the representative of God, runs away from God. Unbelievable – he would not do that. The boat he takes, to get far, far away, is ensnared in a storm. We know from the story the storm

has been sent by God. But it's not Jonah who recognises this. It's the foreign and simple sailors who realise that the storm has been sent by the God of Jonah. That's unbelievable – they have their own Gods. Jonah knows he needs to be thrown overboard if the ship is to be saved, but the sailors do not want to do this – unbelievable, they would want to save their own skin. Jonah insists that they throw him overboard – illogical, he could simply have jumped overboard. In desperation the sailors finally throw Jonah overboard and Jonah is famously swallowed by a great fish, 'the whale' sent by God – unbelievable, whales have got less teeth than I have! Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights – unbelievable, and very smelly. The fish spewed Jonah out upon the dry land – also very smelly, and why would a hungry fish do that?! Jonah, the prophet of God, reluctantly went to Ninevah, the city of foreign unbelievers. It was a vast city three day's walk across – unbelievable, even modern London is not as big as that. Jonah, one man from a country far, far away tells the vast numbers of people in Ninevah that *his* God is about to destroy them. We reach the most unbelievable part of this fishy tale: The great city *immediately* repent, even the king; for who knows? Jonah's God may relent and change his mind. Even the animals are made to wear sackcloth! Unbelievable!

This is a silly, little, story but a precious gem: the plot is deliberately daft but the message is seriously important and wonderful: God's love is immense, immeasurable. God loves everyone, even the foreign Ninevites, God accepts everyone, cares for everyone; not just in some far off future when we die, but now. God loves everyone into eternity, and this includes *now*. God's love is immense, immeasurable, *immediate*.

Consider this picture of a small church surrounded by vast skyscrapers in New York. The book of Jonah is small book surrounded by much bigger books in the OT. Sometimes the much bigger books have been interpreted so as to make God's love exclusive: Only a few are loved, are chosen, are saved. And for what reason? It might be who their parents were, their bloodline. It might also be the rules and commandments that they followed, when others didn't; the sacrifices they made. And at a time when the loudest voices were calling for more exclusivity and less acceptance of others little books like Jonah, and you also may know the book of Ruth, were calling for more acceptance, more tolerance, more love.

How useful, in *our* world of increasing intolerance, new dogmas each with their own new heresies with which to pull down and destroy others, with no right of appeal except to match hate with hate; new bonfires to light on anti-social-media. People are offended *immediately*, people are condemned *immediately*.

How much better the immediacy of love, here and now. God's love to us, God's love echoed through us. The gospel of Mark proclaims the good news of a God who loves now and here and does so immediately. Here are some words from our Bishop, Helen Ann as she reflected this week on today's gospel reading and the immediacy found throughout the gospel of Mark. POWERPOINT. Note 'the time is now', and how Helen Ann links it to the immediacy of the Climate Emergency (*now*) and the immediacy of the message of John the Baptist.

Simon and Andrew were called by Jesus and they went *immediately*. James and John were called by Jesus and they went *immediately*. This seems unbelievable, and yet Their-choice to-choose the nonsensical love of God found in Jesus. Why would he love them, why does God love us? Christ has died, Christ is come (now), Christ will come again!

A word now about Joy, our friend Joy Hornsby. I mentioned, on Safeguarding Sunday, that Gillian and I washed up here 'upon the dry land', at St Marys 21 years ago. I didn't feel worthy of welcome but we received an *immediate* welcome and Joy was very much part of that *immediate* welcome. Joy was a Reader; she preached many sermons both here and elsewhere. It is sometimes said that preachers have one sermon, one message, one important headline, that underpins and filters through into most of their sermons. I don't know if that's true but I do know that at least one of Joy's headlines was a desire to see God's Kingdom done *now*. Martin, last week, gave us a very carefully written sermon about life after death, he shared the thoughts of theologians such as Tom Wright. The text of the sermon is on our website and is definitely worth a re-visit. And it is right in this season of Remembrance and Kingship of Christ that we take time to think of our eternal future with Christ and with each other, in God's-kingdom-to-come. But Joy's headline, I think, was also the prayer 'Thy Kingdom Come *now*', in this world today, *immediately*; in the transformation of unjust structures in society, in this season of remembering to also remember and to serve the forgotten, the poor, the hopeless, the marginalised. To offer a welcome to *all*, as God's kingdom welcomes Joy.

Jesus called Simon and Andrew, he called James and John, and they followed *immediately*, in witness to Christ, and in service of others. May we, when *we* have the opportunities to echo the love of Christ, may *we* do so immediately, to witness to Christ in the service of others. Amen.

