

Martin White. 6th January 2008. Jonah 4

God's Compassion.

Around the country thousands of pastors are standing up about now preaching about the churches vision for the year ahead.

Over the holidays, I was thinking a lot about what I wanted to say this morning to encourage and motivate everyone, and I thought about lots of things that are going on in the church at the moment and different ways we need to grow; giving, evangelism, building cross-culturally, church planting etc. I even had a dream where I was preaching about it all (I was on form!)

But as I started preparing this talk, I had a sense of God speaking to me about the bigger perspective of why exactly God wanted this church to be in this place.

I fully believe that it was God who breathed this church into being and ordained that it should be where it is.

Apologies if you have been around for a long time and have heard this story lots of times before, but briefly, The Crown started taking form in about 1996 when I had a very vivid dream in which Louise and I were leaving our church in Bedford and arriving "somewhere" and being driven around a new area where we were going to plant a new church.

It was utterly vivid - friends were crying as we left our church, and I was being driven round in a car in the new place and someone was telling me about the area around our new home. I could remember the way the conversation went, I could remember roads I was being driven round, I could remember the types of trees that were growing - it was as clear as if I was watching a TV programme.

I woke up in the middle of the night and told Louise that we were going to leave Bedford and plant a church.

Louise - ever one for picky little details asked where we were going to go, and I told her that I hadn't got to that bit yet. The problem was though that I was

far too excited to go back to sleep, so I stayed up and tried to draw the places that I had seen in the dream and looked up the name of the type of trees I had seen.

The next day I told my church leader who offered lots of support and wise advice.

Interestingly, without telling anyone else, that week 3 people came up to me and said "When are you going to plant a church? because I want to come with you."

For the next 2 years we had loads of conversations that went:

"We're going to plant a church"

"Oh, really? Where?"

"I don't know yet... but it has White Poplar trees growing there!"

I remember walking round different towns and praying "God, if this is where you want me to plant a church, I'll do it." Hoping that He would say somewhere nice!

Eventually God spoke to me and showed me that going where there was a need was not a bad thing, so I went back to my leaders and said that I would go wherever there was a need. Different places were suggested, but I had a growing desire to build a multicultural church, so we decided on Handsworth in Birmingham.

A little while before we were due to move up, we came up to 'spy out the land' - the first time I had been to Birmingham, except New Street Station, and got told that a local pastor - Robert Thursfield was able to show us round.

We took him up on his offer and so we got into the car I had seen 2 years ago in the dream, drove round the streets I had seen in the dream, had exactly the conversation I had had in the dream, and saw the trees I had seen in the dream!

So I have no doubt that The Crown was not my idea - it was God's, and He has very specific plans for the church.

And ultimately, God wants His Church here because of His Compassion for the people around it.

As I was preparing, I sensed God speaking to me about His Character and drawing me towards the end of the Book of Jonah. So I want us to look at Jonah Chapter 4, and then I want to try to apply part of it to us as a church.

I guess that many of us will know the story of Jonah, but just to fill in a few details; Jonah was a prophet who God called to go to Nineveh, which was the capital city of Assyria - the big Superpower of the time.

Nineveh was one of the largest cities in the world at the time, with well over 100,000 people, that made it probably 5 times the size of Jerusalem. It had an amazing palace that was 400m squared, with 80 rooms and beautiful carved artwork - some of which is in the British Museum. It had one of the most important libraries in the world (again, some of which is now in the British Museum!) It was a highly cultured place, with a sophisticated religious system.

Nineveh is modern-day Mosul in Iraq, but Jonah finds a ship heading for Tarshish, which was in Spain instead.

God sends a storm and Jonah, who has good credentials as a prophet, recognises that God is stopping him from running away. He obviously isn't running because of fear for his life, because he gets the sailors to throw him overboard, where he is swallowed by a big fish and, a few days later is spat out onto dry land - in effect being given a second chance by God.

This time he goes to Nineveh with the message that in 40 days God is going to judge and destroy Nineveh for its wickedness.

Having given this message, he finds a spot outside the city to watch what will happen next. He makes himself a shelter and sits down.

The Ninevites - from the king down, hear the message, believe God and repent wholeheartedly - and Jonah is furious.

To understand this reaction (other than it being sinful nationalism by Jonah, it is a bit like if someone had taken a message to the Nazis telling them to repent, but secretly hoping they wouldn't escape judgement.

Jonah unleashes his anger towards God and says:

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so

quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (4:1-3, NIV)

In effect, he is saying "That's just like you God - I knew you'd go and forgive them!

His big worry wasn't for his own safety, but that the enemies of Israel might repent and be saved - which is exactly what happens.

While Jonah is sitting, waiting out the 40 days in the hope that God might not actually forgive them and he might be able to see some 'Fire and Brimstone' action after all, God provides a vine to grow up and shade Jonah.

Jonah seems to recognise God's provision and is delighted - in fact, more delighted about a nice shady vine than about a whole city of people.

I'll pick up the story in Chapter 4:

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:5-11 NIV)

I think that what is happening in this chapter is that God is emphasising the contrast between the two things that are going on.

Jonah is emotionally explosive about something as tiny and insignificant as a worm and a weed - his own personal comfort and convenience, against the backdrop of one of the largest cities in the world - 120,000 people, plus animals, which has been sitting on a ticking time-bomb of God's Judgement.

As I was thinking about this preach, I believe God showed me a glimpse of His Compassion and it didn't seem right to talk about tweaking things to make the Church nicer, or better, until we had gone back to the beginning again and looked again at God's Compassion for our city and beyond.

Nineveh was a corrupt, lost, proud, cruel, idolatrous, violent place - and yet God's verdict was "They deserve judgement...but actually they barely know their right hand from their left - so I am going to show them a time of mercy and grace instead.

Actually God's Grace had a limit - they repented, so God turned away His Judgment, but about 130 years later they had gone back to their evil and so Micah and Nahum prophesied against it and in 612BC it was completely destroyed by the Babylonians

What does God think when He looks at Birmingham? He sees through all the crime and false religions and division and hatred and materialism and indifference and sees 1,006,500 in the city or 2,284,093 if you count the West Midlands, who don't know their right hand from their left - and He knows each one of them by name.

So although it may not always seem like it, we are in the Year of God's Favour.

And instead of calling for the judgement that Birmingham deserves, He calls Churches to spring up as a mark of His Grace and Mercy

...And that's where The Crown - and all the other churches in the city come in.

People still carry responsibility for their sin - and will still answer to God, but just like Nineveh, God is holding back His Judgement to give space for people to repent and turn to Him

Methuselah was the oldest person in the Bible (Genesis Chapter 5) - he was Noah's grandfather and he died when he was 969 years old.

His name has 2 meanings - either "Man of the spear" or, literally, "When I die, it will happen." If you do the maths, Methuselah died in the year of the Flood. So his age is an example of *God's Grace* - and His slowness to bring Judgement.

Jonah was quoting from Exodus when he said:

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. (4:2)

So how does this apply to us?

1. Whether you have ever thought about it this way or not, (unless you are visiting), **you are "Called" to Birmingham** - We are on *God's Big Mission* - to tell people the message that there is a *God of Compassion* who loves them and if they turn to Him, they will escape judgment and not be condemned.

In effect, God has "sent" you (and me) to Birmingham.

For me, that was clear - people laid hands on me and sent me to plant a church here.

- But I believe that *God* wants each of us to feel that sense of *Call* to be here; none of us are here by accident.
- Some people may have come here as students (because they didn't get the grades to go elsewhere!)
- Some people may have been born & brought up here - and possibly even struggled when they saw their friends "escape" and long to go too.
- Some people may have been located here by careers or family moves, or the Home Office
- Some people, I know, are only going to be here for a short time and *God* is calling you on elsewhere
- And some people maybe came deliberately in order to build the Church and serve *God's Kingdom*.

Whether you feel like it or not, *God* has called you to be here - as much as He called Jonah to go to Nineveh.

This is *God's Church* that He drew up the blueprints for and He ordained, and He is working out His plans for - and He doesn't make mistakes, and each of us are part of His Plan to be His Salt and Light and display His Compassion.

2. As I was preparing this, I sensed a bit of a rebuke or reminder from God to **beware of letting Consumerism affect the way I see Church.**

It's easy to think "I don't like this" or "Church isn't meeting my needs" or "I'm not being fed"

I don't want to overstate this, but I think that we can bring a kind of consumer mentality to church - and it can end up being similar to Jonah worrying about his shade and his vine, rather than being caught up in God's bigger agenda - the millions of people who are empty and lost and tangled up in sin, who don't know their right hand from their left.

Of course we want Church to be as excellent as it can be - but we need to remember that we don't want that primarily so we can be happier and go home and say "I really enjoyed church today, wasn't the worship good" We need to remember that firstly- **Church isn't for us.** We don't first of all give and serve so we like it more,

Someone said once that Church is a club that exists for its non-members.

Church isn't meant to be the way we like it; sometimes it's inconvenient and uncomfortable and demanding and messy and expensive - because it's not for us; it's for them.

There's a Jewish proverb which says "you can't have an ox in the stalls unless you have a mess on the floor."

3. Finally, as I was preparing, I sensed that God was inviting me and us again to **Taste His Compassion**

As you read through the Book of Jonah, it's easy to not like him very much; he is quite self-centred, he is ultra-nationalistic, God has to put him in a fish for 3 days in order to persuade him to be obedient and rescue 120,000 people, he never repents, he gets angry at God's kindness when it's to other people.

Somehow he managed to be immersed in God's Compassion, but only come up smelling of fish!

God doesn't want us to do this alone - otherwise we risk ending up making the same mistakes Jonah did - maybe showing God's kindness to our friends, but certainly not being able to do the same to our enemies.

Matthew says:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9:35-38 NIV)

The Gospels say 11 times Jesus was filled with compassion (literally "moved in His gut or spleen") Out of the 11 times, once He sent His disciples out, once He taught and 9 times He healed. God's power follows His compassion

We can ask God to fill us with his compassion, to open our eyes, to feel what He feels - and if we ask, I know God will answer us.

If we could see a glimpse Birmingham - the crowds of people shopping in the Bullring, our workmates, our neighbours the way God sees them - just for a second, it would change us.

God has sent each of us, as His Church to the middle of Birmingham with His Message of Grace.

Opportunity for anyone who's not a Christian - We have good news - you can escape judgement. God knows you - all about you and you matter to Him. It's not just that God wants to overlook the mess you have made and pretend it doesn't matter - it's better than that; He wants to forgive all of it, and turn away His anger and show you His kindness and love - forever.