

# What Will You Do with His Voice?

Adrian D. Van Breda

Sermon prepared for **22 January 2006**, sixth sermon<sup>i</sup>.

Readings: Jonah 3 and Mark 1: 14-20

(15 minutes)

Take-Home Message<sup>ii</sup>:

*"We must recognise God's Voice speaking to us and respond with repentance"*

## SEQUENCE<sup>iii</sup>

### 1. Jonah's actions

- a. We know the story well:
  - i. Jonah lived about 750BC, from Galilee
  - ii. God calls him to go *preach against* Nineveh, because of its wickedness
  - iii. Jonah run away from God, catching the first boat to Tarshish – in Spain
  - iv. He is so stressed, he falls into a deep sleep
  - v. A terrible storm erupts
  - vi. Jonah is thrown overboard
  - vii. He nearly drowns, prays for deliverance, and is swallowed by a whale
  - viii. He worships God
  - ix. The whale spits him out on land
  - x. God appears him again, calling Jonah to *proclaim to* Nineveh God's message
  - xi. Jonah obeys, telling the Ninevites, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned"
  - xii. He goes outside the city to wait and see what will happen
  - xiii. The Ninevites repent and God spares the city from destruction
  - xiv. Jonah is peeved with God and chastises Him
  - xv. God challenges Jonah's small heartedness and concludes, "Should I not be concerned about that great city?"
- b. (transition from Jonah to Jonah's contacts) "But let's shift our focus off Jonah, and onto those people with whom Jonah had contact, viz the sailors and the Ninevites. Try to put yourself in their shoes, to experience the story from their perspective, from inside their skin."

### 2. The sailors' experience

- a. Let's start with the sailors:
  - i. You are a sailor, a Phoenician
  - ii. This guy arrives, wants to go with you to Tarshish – has money, will pay
  - iii. Mentions something about running away from his God – nothing to do with you
  - iv. Once out at sea he passes out – poor guy, he's obviously a land lubber
  - v. Terrible storm brews up – you're used to storms, but this is the mother of all storms
  - vi. Pray to your God, eg Yamm the Phoenician God of the Sea
  - vii. Terrified, because you believe in the eternal struggle of the dark power of chaos, represented by the sea, to overcome your God
  - viii. But your prayers don't work – Yamm is not listening, nor is Ba'al or El
  - ix. You all cast lots to see who is angering the Gods – the lot falls to Jonah
  - x. You wake him up and demand to know: "Who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"
  - xi. He says, "I am a Hebrew and I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land".

- xii. In a flash of insight, you suddenly understand what is happening:
  - 1. Yahweh is the God of the sea, stronger than Yamm
  - 2. Jonah has deliberately offended and run away from Yahweh
  - 3. Yahweh is really mad with Jonah and is causing the storm
  - 4. You are absolutely terrified of Yahweh – he's more powerful and dangerous than any god you've ever worshipped
- xiii. You cry out to him, "Are you crazy? What have you done?" You're desperate!
- xiv. After the shock you feel a sudden calm, and you ask "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"
- xv. He tells you to throw him overboard
- xvi. But you are anxious that Yahweh may be angry with you for hurting Jonah
- xvii. So you try to row back to land – but the storm just gets worse – obviously Yahweh does not want you to row to shore!
- xviii. You realise that you will have to do what Jonah has suggested
- xix. So you cry out to Yahweh, "O Yahweh, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Yahweh, have done as you pleased".
- xx. As you throw Jonah overboard and he sinks beneath the waves, the storm suddenly calms – the wind dies down, the clouds roll back, the waters flatten out
- xxi. This is freaky! You know that Yahweh is real and that he really is the God of the heavens, the land and the sea!
- xxii. You immediately offer a sacrifice to him and promise to walk in his way.
- b. Do you see what has happened here? They've encountered the reality of God in the storm. It's as if they've heard God's voice, and recognised it as God's voice.
- c. Like a voice recognition system – have you seen those new kid's diaries that only open to your voice?
- d. And in response to recognising God's voice, they repent and worship him.

### 3. The Ninevites' experience

- a. But let's move forward in the story to the Ninevites. Let's put ourselves in their shoes.
  - i. You are a citizen of Nineveh, a very large walled city in the Mesopotamian valley
  - ii. Your city is named after the Goddess Ishtar, whose name is written with the sign of a fish in an enclosure
  - iii. You and your friends are a free bunch, who do what you like, who live by your own rules. You are part of a great empire and have no problems with self confidence
  - iv. Life in Ninevah is wild – lots of parties, lots of drinking, lots of sex, lots of violence
  - v. One day, a man arrives
  - vi. He looks wild and dishevelled. He is a man with a mission! Obviously, another prophet
  - vii. But his words are simple, calm and direct, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned".
  - viii. You are about to laugh and throw something at him
  - ix. But something about the way he said that catches your attention
  - x. You know that what he is saying is true, absolutely true – that in forty days, God will destroy your city
  - xi. Your immediate response – almost automatic and beyond your control – is to say, "I'm sorry, please forgive me – I didn't mean to be like this".
  - xii. You turn to your friends and you can see that everyone has had the same experience
  - xiii. Almost without a word, you get up, take off your clothes, pull on dirty old sack cloth bags that are in the shed, sit down on the dusty ground, and

refuse to eat. And you start to pray, and pray, and pray, "Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy".

- b. Do you see what has happened here? They've encountered the reality of God in the person of Jonah. It's as if they've heard God's voice, and recognised it as God's voice.
- c. Like a voice recognition system – just like the sailors
- d. And in response to recognising God's voice, they repent and worship him.
- e. (Transition forward 780 years) Will you step forward with me again – some 780 years, into Palestine

#### 4. The disciples' experience

- a. Imagine that you are a fisherman in Galilee, working with your brother and father
  - i. You hear of a man who is preaching, "The time has come – the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"
  - ii. You've heard it all before – there are so many wanna-be prophets floating around Palestine, all claiming to have some revelation from God
  - iii. You are a practical person, the salt of the earth – you work with your hands, catch fish to fill people's bellies – you don't have time for this kind of religious mumbo jumbo.
  - iv. You notice a man walking along the shoreline – you carry on with your work, casting the net out into the waters, pulling it in gently, hoping to have snared one or two fish – your attention is again drawn to this man – there's something about him – can't quite put your finger on it
  - v. He calls out to you and your brother, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men"
  - vi. You're about to tell him to get lost, but there's something in way he spoke to you that halts you
  - vii. Something about the way he looks at you, as if he can see right inside of you, as if he knows everything about you, as if you are something that he made
  - viii. As you look at him – he's some distance away on the shore – it is almost as if you can see eternity in him, as if God is there
  - ix. It's like time stops for a moment, everything around you is silent – the waves have disappeared, your father beside you has vanished, everything has become dark – except for this one man, who seems to shine like the sun
  - x. You feel a tremendous sense of calm, of security, like everything is okay and will always be okay.
  - xi. It is probably just a moment, but it feels like an hour
  - xii. Then you come to, drop your net, dive off the boat into the water – your father is calling you an idiot, but you ignore him – you swim to shore and fall in step beside him.
- b. Do you see what has happened here? They've encountered the reality of God in this man Jesus. It's as if they've heard God's voice, and recognised it as God's voice.
- c. Like a voice recognition system – just like the sailors and the Ninevites – they've recognised the voice of God in this man
- d. And in response to recognising God's voice, they leave everything and follow him and worship him.
- e. (transition to what we can learn from this) So, we have here three stories, about different people, at different times in history. Yet all three seem to have had an experience of hearing God's voice and recognising it as God's voice. For all three sets of people, they seem to have had a voice recognition system that detected the voice of God in something or someone they encountered.

#### 5. How God speaks to us

- a. It is interesting to notice the different ways in which God spoke to these three people
  - i. The first group heard the voice of God in nature – in a storm – something about that storm was significant and they recognised that God was controlling the storm.

- ii. The second group heard the voice of God in a person – a stranger – something about Jonah, a person from another culture and region, made them take notice.
    - iii. The third group heard the voice of God in God's Son – in Jesus himself – they recognised that Jesus was not just another prophet, but in fact, God's own.
  - b. It is still like this for us:
    - i. People often first recognise God in nature – in the immense size of the universe, in the intricate design of a dragon fly, in the infinite uniqueness of snow flakes, in the miracle of birth.
    - ii. Many people recognise God in others – in the caring way that a person relates to them, in the integrity of someone at work, in the way a person honestly deals with a life crisis, in the congruence between a person's religion and their lifestyle.
    - iii. And eventually, we recognise God in the person of his Son – in the things Jesus said during his life; in the way he interacted with the woman at the well, with the Jewish leaders, with the rich fool; in the way he expressed God's love for humanity; in the way he sacrificed himself for us.
- 6. How we recognise God's voice
  - a. But how do we know it's God's voice we're hearing, and not someone else's or even our own?
  - b. We know that each person has a unique voice – as unique as a finger print or as DNA. But how does a voice recognition system learn to distinguish between one voice and another voice?
  - c. How does a baby learn to recognise her mother's voice? How does a mother learn to hear her baby's cry amidst many other baby cries in a crèche?
  - d. We learn through repeated exposure to the voice and through emotional connection to that voice.
  - e. And in the same way, we learn to recognise God's voice through repeated exposure to his voice and through emotional connection with him.
  - f. And how can we be exposed to his voice? Through reading his Word. The Bible is the place where God has guided many different humans over many years to record God's voice.
  - g. The more we read God's Word, the more tuned in we become to his Voice, the better our voice recognition system works, the quicker and easier to we recognise his voice in unexpected situations.
- 7. My own experience
  - a. If I could illustrate this briefly with a personal example
  - b. A few years ago I began to experience pain in my hands when I was playing the piano or typing
  - c. Over time, the pain grew steadily worse and worse, until it was really very painful to play here on Sundays
  - d. I knew something was wrong, but, honestly, I was afraid to do anything about it
  - e. Eventually, I realised I needed help and went to the doctors and was diagnosed with osteoarthritis. The doctors recommended surgery
  - f. As you can imagine, I went into a terrible depression
  - g. But from inside my emotional crisis, I began to recognise God's voice – what he wanted me to learn from this crisis
  - h. One of the things I heard him saying to me through this experience was that I needed to put music in its place – not at the front of my faith, but in a secondary role
  - i. And, at least in part, this led to my recognition of God's call on my life to serve him in ministry
  - j. As you can hear, my voice recognition system is not very good – it took me some years to recognise God's voice and to respond to him.
- 8. How we respond to God's voice

- a. But respond we must – and this is what we see with the sailors (who offered sacrifice to God), with the Ninevites (who repented of their ways) and with the first disciples (who left their nets and followed Jesus).
- b. And it is this responsiveness that God wants from us.
- c. He wants us to recognise his voice and to respond in repentance.

9. Application

- a. How are you doing with this? How do you hear God's voice? Do you recognise God in the world around you? In nature? In things that happen to you? In people you meet? In strangers? In the Bible? In the preaching at St Martins? In Jesus?
- b. How are you doing in responding to God's voice? Is your heart soft and responsive? Do you allow God to speak into your life? Do you make changes in your life in response to God's promptings? Do you think that you are growing in your faith? Are you growing in holiness? Are you becoming more and more like Christ?
- c. Let me suggest a few things that we can do to put all of this into practice:
  - i. Firstly, read your Bible. This is how we get to recognise God's voice. Don't just read books about the Bible or by Christians. Read the Bible.
  - ii. Secondly, you could consider putting aside a little time at the end of each day, to reflect over the things that have happened to you. And ask God how he has been speaking to you through these things. Sometimes we only hear God's voice in retrospect. This is okay – retrospection is a way to learn to recognise God's voice when you are in the moment.
  - iii. Thirdly, you could consider asking God to show you what he wants you to do in response to what he's saying to you. You shift the focus off learning about God, to responding to God. You ask yourself, "How could I live my life differently knowing what I know now?"
- d. What will you do with God's voice?

<sup>i</sup> **Preaching Without Notes.** So, my experiences of preaching without notes has been valuable and informative. I do think it is more effective than preaching from a script, even if the script is just used as a guide. So, I bought Joseph Webb's book, "Preaching without notes", and prepared this sermon using (broadly) his approach.

<sup>ii</sup> **Selecting the Text.** My main text is Jonah 3, which is about Jonah preaching to the Ninevites. There are several lessons/themes that can be extracted from this and the book as a whole (obedience, fear, God's mercy, universalism vs ethnocentricity, etc), but the focus of the Gospel reading appears to be on the theme of repentance. So I decided to make this the focus.

A fabulous pair of articles by Wendland (from the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1996) gave me insight into the beautiful literary structure of the entire book, and especially into the parallels between the first and third chapters. Initially I wanted to bring these parallels into the sermon, but they seem to forced and of limited hermeneutic value, so I dropped them. But I did decide to cover both chapters in the sermon.

In Jonah one's attention is really drawn to Jonah – the servant who is called, but runs away, is caught up by God, obeys, then grumbles. But in order to get to the repentance theme, I needed to shift the focus off Jonah and onto the people Jonah encountered – the sailors and the Ninevites. Hence the focus of the sermon.

Lastly, I did want to bring the Gospel reading in, in order to bring the focus more strongly onto the idea of "Repent and believe the good news!" which is nicely linked to Jonah's message in chapter 3 of his book.

**Finding the Theme.** What struck me about these three passages is that they all involve God speaking to people (sailors, Ninevites, Jews), calling them to repentance, using different modes (nature, strangers, the Son). This became then the focus of my sermon, hence the take-home message (theme or bottom line) and title.

**Finding a Metaphor.** Finding a metaphor was a new experience for me. I looked and looked at the take-home message, and eventually put the words "recognise" and "voice" together, to get voice recognition. This for me is a metaphor that pulls the stories together – the machine is constantly on the alert, listening for someone to speak, and when someone speaks it is able to distinguish a Voice from among many other voices, and then it reacts (by opening a door). Recently, they advertised girls voice-recognition diaries on TV (for Christmas). This will be most suitable.

**Finding an Illustration.** The church is currently quite cathected to me personally, so I feel comfortable using a personal illustration. I decided on my arthritis as "God's Voice" because it is less direct than a scripture verse, because it is emotive, because they will all relate immediately to my distress (to the crisis ito playing piano), and to the resolution (ito preaching and training for ministry).

<sup>iii</sup> Finding a sequence was interesting – I started with the headings as follows: Jonah's actions (transition from Jonah to Jonah's contacts); The sailors' experience; The Ninevites' experience (transition forward 700 years); The disciples' experience (transition forward 2000 years); My own experience (transition to what we can learn from this); How God speaks to us; How we recognise God's voice (transition to application); How we respond to God's voice.

Then I noticed the four sets of experiences in a row, which I felt would be tedious. So I moved my own experience later, to serve as a contemporary and personal illustration, rather than just as a fourth example. This resulted in a change to the transitions.

I start with Jonah's story, because this is what we are familiar with – I wanted to start with what they know and expect, which will make the transition to Jonah's contacts more striking.