

A Great City and a Great God – Archbishop Peter Jensen
Sunday February 8 2009, Connect09 Big Day In launch

These are momentous days. Momentous days for our nation. Momentous days for our church. Connect09 creates a historic moment.

We are joining together in a great team effort to make personal contact with every person in the region of our diocese through the word of God.

We aim to connect them with us and with the Lord Jesus Christ. We expect that your church will pray, connect and expect.

But I have two questions:

First, are you willing to be part of God's work?

Second, can God – would God – shake a great region with the Gospel?

Now the prophet Jonah was also sent to a great populace in the city of Nineveh, with the word of God. He promptly abandoned his post. He 'ran away from the Lord'. He no longer wished to be a prophet.

Why? Well, he didn't like what God told him to do. He was not willing to be part of God's work.

He fled. The Lord hurled a storm at his ship; the sailors hurled the cargo overboard; and in the end, they hurled him overboard, too. All this hurling going on. Even in his disobedience however, he was a sort of 'walking word of God' was Jonah. And the sailors around him began to trust the Lord.

The Lord both judged and saved his prophet, by appointing the famous great fish to swallow him. It was a sort of judgement; a sort of being-buried-alive experience; a hell before hell. But the prophet called out to the Lord, and so was saved by this great creature. The fish spat him out on the dry ground. He found God's mercy even in the middle of judgement. You see there's a grace in God's justice, and justice in God's grace.

'Then the word of the Lord' – the scriptures tell us - 'Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message that I give you".'

Was he willing to be part of God's work?

Me? Well now I think I would still hesitate to go if I were Jonah. I could think of many reasons for not wanting to contact the greatest city of Nineveh through the word of God:

It's highly inconvenient.

I could imagine myself saying it's a long journey to Nineveh.

I'm an incredibly busy person.

It could take the whole of my annual holidays to walk there.

Surely it's enough that I make it to church most Sundays.

And I do take the kids to the youth group.

And I'm even prepared to go on rosters.

I can think of a million reasons why I wouldn't want to go to Nineveh.

These are the reasons that you and I would voice. But there was and is a deeper issue than that.

You know for Connect09 we did a survey. We surveyed Anglicans here in Sydney. We discovered that two fears keep most of us back from contacting our neighbours with the word of God.

First, fear of rejection by other people. It's so unnatural to share the word of God in contemporary Australia.

Second, fear of not knowing what to say. We don't feel equipped to help a person connect with God.

Now, I have to say it's normal to have those fears. But what are we going to do about them?

Think of Jonah. Nineveh was a great city, a city great in size. Its boundaries were large, its inhabitants were many. It was an important city - a great military and political force; it was a great trading city; it was wealthy and strong; it was violent, it was a city in which there was unrighteousness and evil. It's quite likely that it would reject a prophet like Jonah from another culture, and to do so brutally. Like the big fish it might spit him out of its mouth too and the rejection would be public and painful.

Well might Jonah be afraid! But you conquer fear, as a Christian, by your faith in the sovereign God who is in charge of all things. You know, as we

go to share the gospel with our neighbours, we can trust him to be at work before we arrive.

Our Diocese spans a great region, from the Hawkesbury to Ulladulla, from Lithgow to Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. It contains over four million people from all around the world. One in every five Australians lives in the diocese of Sydney. In Sydney, it's wealthy, culturally advanced. Sydney is a great city, a proud city, a city so proud in fact that it takes its own superiority for granted. It doesn't care what others may think of it. That's Sydney. It's beautiful, well-ordered, rich, comfortable. And think of Wollongong, even better. When we talk about God in this city, it's not actually a very welcome theme is it? It's too disturbing. It makes you unpopular to talk about God, have you noticed that? And by the way you can blaspheme all you like, right? You can swear all you like. You can defame people all you like. But try talking naturally about the Lord in this city and see how people don't like it.

Well you know, Jonah may have been afraid – but in fact the real issue for Jonah and for us lay even deeper than that.

Was it the message that the Lord sent with him? Did that make him embarrassed? You see, sometimes the problem is that we don't actually believe our own gospel. We lack confidence in its power to change lives.

His message, the message Jonah was sent with, was pretty simple and what's called hard-line: 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned'.

What was he saying?

There is such a thing as evil; there is right and wrong, there is truth and error; there is a God who rules the world and knows the secrets of our hearts; there is a law of God which we are expected to keep; there is a God who remembers what we say and what we do and even what we think and scheme; there is a God whom we all should worship with our heart, and soul and mind and strength. And there is a God who will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, namely Jesus Christ. There is a God before whom before all of us must stand to give an account of ourselves. There is a need to repent.

It's a hard line message. It's the message of the bible. It's the message that God gives us. It was the message of God to Nineveh, the message of wrath to come, which Jonah did not want to deliver.

But he did it in the end. In the hell of that belly he had found repentance. Before the fish spat him out, he had turned back to the Lord and he had brought his way into line with God's will. And so he went to Nineveh, even though he might have been on the church roster. We may need to confront our fears. We may need to actually do something about them. The fear of rejection and the fear of not knowing what to say, they can be dealt with. We certainly need to take the opportunity provided by Connect09, to learn how to speak for Christ in our community. I'm trusting that all our churches are geared to help us to speak for Christ.

You know, our obedience to God leads to blessing for other people. Against all his wildest imaginings, this solo Hebrew prophet with his message of

judgement on that proud and accomplished people, was going to see a miracle take place.

Remember the question? Can God shake a great city, a great region with the gospel? The answer is Yes; even Nineveh can be brought its knees. To the ignorant, God brought knowledge; to the proud, he brought humility; to the lost he brought salvation – he broke the spiritual drought, he poured forth his blessing, he overwhelmed that city – he *overturned* the city as he said he would, not with wrath, but with forgiveness, and peace and hope. The city turned to God in repentance. And how did he do it? He did it through his word spoken by a very unworthy prophet.

Here's a great hope for us in 2009. Yes, our region is more resistant to the gospel than many places in the world. But if Nineveh can be saved, so too people from our part of the world can be turned over by God: Listen, 'When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and he did not bring upon them the destruction that he had threatened.'

Isn't that great? You see, this is a moment for us, Sydney Anglicans, to trust in God and to be energetic. As an Anglican people, we are launching a coordinated campaign to personally contact every region, every resident in our region with the word of God. Will we re-connect with our communities and help connect people with God through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit?

Are you fearful? I'm a bit nervous myself frankly! But I'll tell you what I'm doing. I'm bringing my fears – yeah I have them too – I'm bringing my fears and my sin and my over-busyness to the Lord who is in charge of all things. I'm asking him, that in spite of our weaknesses, that we act together, and our acting together in obedience to him will bring blessing to thousands of people in our region through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Is there anything more important than that?

You know it. I know it.

It's not up to us to dictate how God is going to use our efforts this year. But I know this - obedience leads to blessing for others. We've been praying, haven't we? We've been praying that God will bless our community. Now let's see how he intends to hear and answer our prayers. We can be sure of this: it is in his nature to have mercy. You see, ask this question: How much will God sacrifice to order to save human beings? God is love: the death of Jesus settled that question forever.

So, no doubt God can shake a people. Even our people.

But are we willing to be part of this work? That's the other question. Which reminds me by the way: why *was* Jonah so resistant? What a pain in the neck. What was his reason for not wanting to engage in Connect 759 BC? Could it be that his reason is also our real reason?

It was because he didn't like the love of God. He didn't like the love of God for people who were foreigners to him. When they turned to the Lord and he forgave them, Jonah was angry. 'This is what he said... this is why I ran

away.’ ‘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; it’s better for me to die than to live, now that I’ve seen the love of God.’

The prophet who had received mercy himself, hated to see mercy shown to other people. He could not bear to think that the love of God might spill out to proud, cruel and evil people like the Ninevites. He accurately judged their sins, he was pretty good at that; he accurately also judged the nature of the loving heart of God; he saw, but he hated the idea that God would love across boundaries. And when the sinful heart of the prophet was disclosed in all its narrow lovelessness, the Lord confronted him with a question, and it’s a question that sits right at the end of the book of Jonah aimed at you and me. ‘But Nineveh (that’s Sydney) 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?’

In my wild erratic fancy, I visit all the parts of this great Diocese of ours – the Northern beaches, the West, the Illawarra, Wollongong, the Inner City, the Southern Tablelands, the Shire, Liverpool, Camden, the Eastern Suburbs the North Shore, the City itself...etc...wherever you are this morning, yes, I visit you in prayer. What does God see when he visits though?

Well he sees our grubby ways, he sees our violence; he sees our abuse behind closed doors very often, he sees our arrogance; he sees our immorality; he sees our lack of compassion; he sees our carelessness in the things that really matter; he hears our lies and our endless chatter, chatter,

chatter, chatter about money and real estate; he sees our lack of commitment to relationships; he knows us better than we know ourselves. And he sees the miserable end of all these things in the catastrophe of his judgement that will be brought upon them.

And what's God's attitude? While there is still time, he reaches out in love, compassion, mercy, to bring the blessings of salvation. Listen; 'Should I not be concerned about that great city?'

The question to Jonah is actually aimed at you. What do you really want God to do? One of our Sydney Anglican sins, dear brothers and sisters, is our lack of love for those outside the gospel. It's the narrow-mindedness of Jonah. Sometimes, we don't want to change our churches; we're comfortable, we don't want to change; sometimes we don't want to go to the trouble of reaching out to others; we resent the fact that people from other lands and other cultures have come into our suburb and made life different; we want our church to serve us socially and spiritually, we want our children to be looked after and brought up properly, but we don't want to be challenged to connect, to be neighbours to those in need.

Let me ask my questions again then:

Can God shake a great region with the Gospel? He saved Nineveh from the deserved destruction in his wrath. He can do a great work in our Diocese of bringing many people to himself in repentance and faith. Yes, that can happen.

Are we willing to be part of this work? The second question. And I say to you, please do not be like the prophet Jonah – resistant, grudging, in a spirit opposite to the Spirit of God's. Stricken down by his own lovelessness. And I say to you and it is my prayer for you and my prayer for myself. May the gospel of God's love so move your hearts that you will want to overcome all barriers and connect across all cultures, with the message of Jesus. My prayer is that in church after church Christians will be galvanised to go into their community and make personal contact, contact that will connect people with the Lord. My prayer is that we will all, all give ourselves to this great campaign and that as we do we will experience the blessing of God, not simply upon ourselves, but upon all.

Pray. Connect. Expect. May it be so!