Remembrance day 2015

Jonah 3

St Francis 10am

I heard this story the other day. In America there was an old lady called Mrs Morgan she lived door to a group of boys who were starting a rock band. One day they got a new drummer in and he played all day, from before breakfast till late at night. She said it was driving her crazy so she went to tell them to shut up. One of the boys answered the door and said proudly but Miss Morgan we got a *live* drummer in today. Quick as a flash she said if he touches that drum stick one more time he gonna be a *dead* drummer. And that was the last she heard of them that day!

Sometimes nations are in a life or death situation, they are on the brink of catastrophe.

In 1915 Britain face the brutal horror of the trenches.

In 1940 Britain was facing military disaster with the British Expeditionary Force of over 300,000 men stranded in France.

2,500 years ago the city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire, faced impending overthrow and destruction.

In such a situation, what happens when a nation calls out to God? Do things change, do miracles happen? *Sometimes* is the answer.

We don’t know what the threat was facing the large city of Nineveh, by the way located in modern day Iraq. We do know that this empire was the enemy of the Jews, attacking, enslaving and destroying cities especially in northern Israel. Yet God was on a mission to save Nineveh, with their cooperation. Before the Ninevites were aware of it, God had initiated a plan. He would send a prophet, Jonah to tell them to repent and change their ways. But Jonah is both a coward and a hater of Nineveh. We all know the story – Jonah flees the opposite direction, gets thrown off the boat, get swallowed up by a whale and vomited on a beach. Quite a few miracles on the way. Take two.

He travelled to Nineveh, and started to walk around this large city. He told the inhabitants that they had to repent or else the city would be overthrown. Now imagine going round Croydon shouting the end is nigh. You’d probably get sectioned or at least totally ignored. But another miracle happened because God had initiated and purposed it. The Ninevites didn’t believe Jonah. In verse 5 it says they believed *God*. How often do we take the credit when something goes well or beat ourselves up when something goes wrong. Actually, it’s not always to do with us, it’s to do with God. Yes, we do respond, but God initiates.

So an amazing miracle occurs and the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth. Another miracle: the king heard about it and he put on sackcloth and told everyone to do what they were already doing. It’s unprecedented, it’s amazing and certainly not how Jonah expected it to turn out. In fact he was quite upset about it. But God thought differently, so:

**10**When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

So Nineveh survived, Nineveh is off the hook. What a miracle! God initiated it, Jonah delivered it and the people of Nineveh believed it. Simple!

It reminds me of another story in WW2. The Miracle of Dunkirk.

May 1940 was a time of grave crisis for Britain. The British Expeditionary Force of 330,000 men were surrounded by Hitler’s army in Northern France, overpowered by superior numbers, airpower and technology. This vast army faced annihilation or capture. Britain faced defeat. The decision was reached to evacuate the forces, thinking that 30,000 might be saved.

On the 26th May 1940, King George the VI called a national day of prayer. The King, the Prime Minister and cabinet, and millions of people flocked to churches to pray for national salvation. An enormous cry of prayer went up to God on that day and that prayer was answered.

The next day, inexplicably, the German army called a halt to their advance, despite being only 10 miles from the Allied lines. On the 28th May, a great storm broke over Flanders which grounded the Luftwaffe, but it allowed British soldiers to reach the port safely. The next days the sea was calm though fog kept the Luftwaffe largely grounded. And a vast armada of little ships, as we know, were then able to cross the channel and rescue 338,000 men in an extraordinary feat of logistics. A national day of thanksgiving was held on 9th June to give thanks to God.

I believe God purposed to save this nation from an evil Nazi threat in 1940. A nation called out to God, not in ones or two, but in millions, and we believe that God carried out his promise and rescued the fate of this country.

Strangely enough there is a National Day of Prayer and Worship being held at Selsdon Park Hotel next week on the 13th and 14th November, with the founder of Global Day of Prayer Jonathan Oloyede.

So we might ask why doesn’t God always intervene in such as miraculous way? Another event which had its 100th anniversary in October. The life and death of Edith Cavell.

Edith Cavell was a vicar's daughter, and an influential pioneer of modern nursing in Belgium, and a strong Christian.

When World War 1 broke out Edith's hospital treated wounded soldiers of all nationalities. Her strong Christian beliefs motivated her to help all those in need, both German and Allied soldiers. She once said, "I can't stop while there are lives to be saved". However, when some wounded British soldiers, who had been cut off from their comrades, arrived, Edith had to face a near-impossible dilemma: if she helped the soldiers she put at risk the neutrality of the Red Cross and would possibly endanger others working with her. If she refused to help them they would be in danger of being executed, along with any civilians who had harboured them.

Edith decided to help them despite the risk to herself. "Had I not helped, they would have been shot", she later said. She then agreed to join a Belgian underground movement and helped more than 200 Allied soldiers to escape to neutral territory. When the network was betrayed, she was arrested, tried by a court martial, found guilty of treason and sentenced to death.

There were many protestations from the UK and even the USA joined in. Despite this she was executed on October 12th, 1915, in Brussels, causing international outrage.

On the eve of her execution she had said, " Standing as I do in view of God and Eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough, I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone". But her forgiving and gracious attitude did not save her from her fate.

And neither did it save many countless servicemen and women, not to mention medics, humanitarian aid workers and journalists in the course of conflict. These we remember today.

Why did God save the thousands at Nineveh, the hundreds of thousands at Dunkirk and yet not the noble Edith Cavell and many like her?

Part of the answer is that millions responded in prayer and repentance in the first two cases. Part of the answer is that God initiated the salvation of Nineveh, and perhaps even Dunkirk.

But there is always an element of mystery, of the mind of God unknowable, unfathomable and we have to accept that.

Our response in times of crisis should be to seek God and his will, to gather as many people as possible to pray in humble submission to Him.

And finally, to leave the rest to Him and His mysterious ways.

Amen.