When I looked at the lectionary on Monday to start to think about today, I was reminded of times gone by when my children were much younger, I was amazed by their constant and consistent ability to be reluctant.

It really didn't matter what they had to do they would always find an excuse, a reason not to, something else that had to be done before hand, or something that was far more important , before doing the job in hand.

Maybe this was due to them thinking, that whatever I wanted them to do, if they left it long enough, I would do for them. Or maybe it was due to them being unsure I have had to complete the task? Or maybe they were just being wilful and defiant.

However, for the most part I would prevail, the beds would get made, dishes washed and washing in the wash basket, followed by them storming off, in fits of teenage angst and grumps.

The story of Jonah and the fish is a story of wilfulness, defiance, a battle of wills, running away, eventually getting the job done and plenty of sulking.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh, the Capital city of the Assyrians, the sworn enemy of Jonah and his people and tell them to change their ways and God will show them mercy.

Jonah flew into a rage with God, how can God show mercy to the Assyrians, they are the enemy, like the workers in the vineyard, we have just heard about in Matthew 10 1-16, Jonah was angry at the generosity of God, like the workers who worked all day Jonah was angry that God was going to reward those who had not toiled for so long, he was angry- not that he or his people would be getting less than promised, but that others would get the same as them.

In Jonah’s mind they were not God’s people so God should not be merciful to them.

He could not see the works of Grace and Mercy, that God was showing to others, would not detract from his relationship with God, he did not want to share the blessing.

You can hear the thoughts running through Jonah’s mind “we have been your people for ever, suffering, 40 years wondering around, and you now want to show the same mercy to the Assyrians.

On your bike God, go find someone else I’m totally not going!”

And with that he upped and left for Joppa, boarded a ship and set of for Tarshish, which is thought to have been on the coast of Spain, it was seen as an exotic faraway place, and in Jonah’s world as far away from Nineveh as you could possibly get, about 2000 miles away as Nineveh is in what we now call Iraq. Not a promising start for a prophet!

As we know the Ship is then overcome by a great storm and Jonah is identified as the cause of God’s anger, thrown overboard, rescued from drowning by a great fish and vomited up on a strange beach.

Reluctantly, then and a bit like a stroppy teen making the bed, Jonah realised resistance is futile and doesn’t fancy a second time in the belly of the fish, so agrees to go to Nineveh.

When Jonah arrives in Nineveh, he reluctantly declares that if the citizens do not amend their ways and live a Godly life, god will destroy the city in 40 days.

Much to Jonah’s surprise the whole city from King to Donkey, quick as a flash repent , the whole nine yards, sack cloth, ashes, crying out to God for mercy, REVIVAL broke out, this is every preachers dream, you speak, people hear and instantly refocus their lives on God.

But, oh no not Jonah, he is miserable, eventually asking God to take his life as he can’t stand all this mercy for sinners.

After the salvation of Nineveh, true to form, Jonah heads of, finds a field sits down and sulks, God sees him and makes a bush to grow to give him shelter, which seems to plicate Jonah and for a while he is happy, but then God commands a worm to eat the plant and Jonah is once more depressed.

There are lots of theories about why God asked the worm to eat the plant, ranging from Jonah was idolising the plant to Yahweh scolded him for taking so much joy from a plant that he did not make grow, while feeling no sorrow for thousands of people in Nineveh.

This is a story of obedience, faith and God’s unbounded mercy.

Generally, when we read this book in the bible, we think about Jonah after all its his book. A book about a prophet, it is the prophet who is the good guy, doing Gods will and bringing a message of hope and transformation to others, but warning of the consequencs of not doing so.

But actually, Jonah was the least obedient character in the story, everyone else, the fish, the bush and the worm, were more obedient to God than Jonah was.

The pagan sailors prayed and worshipped the Lord. The fish obeyed God. The Assyrians repented and amended their ways. The bush grew because of God. The worm did what God desired it to, without question they all did as they were asked first time with no argument, discussion, or diversion.

But Jonah was still the central character.

What can we take from the story

Well firstly, if we need to be open to the possibility that God may call us to be his ministers. To be the voice that leads others into a relationship with him. If we are unsure of our call, don’t be like Jonah and run, stay with it, seek clarification and discernment, pray and ask, talk it through. Avoid Tarshish !

Secondly, we need to understand that God’s mercy, love and grace will not be limited by our lack of vison and short-sightedness. God’s love is bigger than our theology!

Thirdly, that everything has a role to play in the story of salvation, the fish, the sailors, the worm, the plant, Jonah and now us.