

Introduction to Jonah

Walt Disney gave us Pinocchio. Herman Melville gave us Moby Dick. The Old Testament gives us Jonah who, a bit like Pinocchio, has to be taught a lesson. Although there is humor in this absurd story, there is little to laugh about. Jonah is as obsessed as Captain Ahab but not with the whale but with his own brand of religion.

Jesus and Jonah

We modern readers of the book focus so much on the big fish that we fail to be amazed at the big God who is the prime-mover in the story. Jonah is 'swallowed' and after three days is ejected from the fish's watery belly. Early Christians saw this as a sign of death and resurrection (1 Cor.15.4). Literary experts have also shown that this theme of dying and rising is also present through the use of certain words. The phrase 'to go down' appears in 1.3, 1.5, and 2.6 where Jonah descends to the land of death. The resurrection word is 'arise' (1.1, 1.6, and 3.2). The king of Nineveh (3.6) hears God's message and 'rises' from his throne to proclaim repentance.

One of the words most used in the book is 'great' or 'big' (1.2, 1.4, 1.12, 17; 3.1, 3.5; 4.11). This frequency is compounded by the fact that in Hebrew there are no adverbs so that the literal translation of 'they feared exceedingly' (1.10) would be 'they feared with a great fear'. This same note of fear, awe and wonder is found in Mark's account of the resurrection (Mk.16.8).

Is the story true?

Jesus said, 'For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three night the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth' (Matt.12.40). It has been argued that because his own resurrection actually took place, Jonah must have spent the same time in the belly of the fish. Although some people are persuaded by this, many have said that the whole book is a fiction. This is to go too far because there was actually a prophet called Jonah (2 Kings 14.25-28).

Usually in the prophetic books of the Old Testament there is an indication of context to help us to fit the prophet into a particular historical situation. Not so here! There is, however, a theological connection with the 2 Kings passage. Both are

about the triumph of God's grace over evil. In 2 Kings, God's compassion for Israel is not thwarted by the wickedness of king Jeroboam II, while in Jonah; God's work of salvation in Nineveh is not sabotaged by the prophet's obstinacy.

The first Hebrew word of the text of Jonah is translated 'And it happened'. This sends a signal to the Jewish reader that we may be dealing with story rather than factual history. It has been suggested that Jonah, like the book of Ruth, was religious tract written after the exile when, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, Jewish exclusivism was rampant. These two tiny books, with their universal message of love, were prophetic counter blasts over and against the religious racism of their day.

To ask if the story of Jonah is true is different from asking if every fact in the story can be historically verified. In the Bible, truth is presented in many ways. Even in the New Testament the four Gospel writers interpret the fact of Jesus of Nazareth from four different perspectives and in doing so give us a multi-dimensional picture of Jesus the Christ. Their narratives provide windows into his life, ministry, miracles, conversations, teaching and the major events of his last week. Is it all true? I answer in the affirmative while recognizing that 'truth' comes to us in different ways through various literary genres.

Images and metaphors

The writer of Jonah knew how to use different genres in his parody of the prophet and teases us further by his use of 'image'. The Jews, as a land-locked people, had an inherent fear of all things aquatic. When it came to the gods of the enemy, there were a plethora of 'fish gods'. The Philistines and the Canaanites had *Dagon*, the Egyptians had *Latos* and the Assyrians had *nina*; a fish goddess. Nineveh, said to be founded by king Nin-us, is in itself a translation from its original language as '*closed water*' and develops in Hebrew as the '*City of Fish*'. This places the Jonah narrative under a very fishy microscope. Jonah is swallowed by a big fish; Nineveh is a big 'fish city'. Jonah is in the belly of the fish for three days and nights; the journey across Nineveh takes three day. Jonah's experiences of being in the belly of the fish and in the belly of Nineveh were not pleasant.

Peter received his vision of God's all-embracing mission (Acts 10). Christians would see the significance of this. Jonah found a ship and paid the fare. He will continue to pay the price in more ways than one!

PREACHING POINTS *Sermon title: 'Have we grown out of sin?'* How would you define sin? Here are two extreme definitions: A - 'sin is simple human dysfunction'. B - 'sin is a moral cancer of the heart mind and will'. Where would you position yourself between these two extremes? What does the writer of Jonah understand sin to be? Does sin always have consequences?

Jonah not only disobeyed God by going west instead of east, he went 'down' rather than 'up'. He is told to 'rise up; but instead he 'goes down' first to Joppa, then 'down' to the ship. When the storm breaks he goes 'down' into the belly of the ship and lies 'down'

He repudiates his divine commission in every way. Have you ever tried to run away from God?

Running away from God

Jonah was to discover, in a most dramatic way, that God is not a benign limited presence but an active, moving, living God. Francis Thompson (1859 -1907) in a poem describes God as 'The Hound of Heaven'. This God relentlessly pursues Jonah who now begins to pay the price for his disobedience. Not allowing Jonah to escape, God 'hurled' a great wind upon the sea. The word 'hurl' conjures up a violent image. The narrator uses this word several times. The sailors 'hurl' the cargo overboard before finally 'hurling' the disobedient prophet into the abyss.

Is God a violent, angry deity? Parts of the Old Testament seem to suggest this. What sort of God do you believe in?

PREACHING POINTS *Sermon title: 'A big dangerous God'* God is dangerous. See Exodus 19. Annie Dillard writes: 'Why do people in church seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we blithely invoke? It is madness for ladies to wear straw

hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Stewards should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

Throughout the book God keeps demonstrating his almighty power but God's power is not malign. It is in the words of Paul, 'the power of God for salvation to everyone' (Rom.1.16). God pursues Jonah not to punish him but to save him from himself. God's anger is not linked with retributive justice but with restorative justice.

A Multi-faith Dialogue

Unlike Moses and Jeremiah who on receiving a divine summons argue with God (Exod. 3.11f and Jer.1.6), Jonah says nothing! He refuses to vent his frustration. In a state of total denial he hides and sleeps while a terrifying storm rages all about him. His refusal to face reality and pray prompts the frightened captain to seek him out and shout. 'What are you doing sleeping at a time like this?'

Sailors are very superstitious. Someone on board must have caused the storm. Jonah is identified through the casting of lots. In a morbid conference he is subjected to an intense interrogation. Why?...what? ...where?... who? Finally all the questions culminate in the big question 'What shall we do with you?'

Jonah has hitherto maintained his silence. Now the whole sorry tale spills out. He confesses he is a Hebrew who worships the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. This increases the anxiety levels of the sailors. The word Jonah uses for God is the holy name 'Yahweh'; first revealed to Moses (Ex.3.14). The sailors worship a plethora of different deities translated here by the Hebrew word 'Elohim'. (literally 'gods' but is generally used in the Bible to mean the 'god of gods'.) Both words occur many times in this book of Jonah.

PREACHING POINTS

Go through the whole book and mark the two words for God asking yourself why the word LORD is used in a particular place rather than the other more general word 'God' or 'gods.' What words do you use for God in your private prayers? Why?

2. Out of the depths

The big fish

For a non maritime nation like the Jews, the sea was dangerous. It symbolized the forces of chaos which, like Noah's flood, could obliterate all life. The first listeners would have asked 'why did Jonah attempt such a sea voyage? Surely it can only end in disaster.' The narrator will keep his audience in suspense as he gradually unfolds the answer. In the primal cosmic chaos of the sea there lived a terrifying monster called Leviathan (Ps.74.14 & Isa.27.1). He is described fully in Job.41. He enters the story now as the 'big fish.'

In pre-modern times, readers of Jonah would have no difficulty in believing that God could appoint a big fish to save the prophet. They would chuckle at the irony of it. The word 'swallow' (also translated 'gulp down') would however quickly wipe the smile from their faces. The Old Testament people of God would be reminded of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who like a Leviathan dragon from the deep 'devoured' Israel (Jer. 51.34 & 44).

PREACHING POINTS *Sermon title: 'Looking at God's Creation with new eyes'* We have had the big storm, now we have the big fish and in chapter 4 God will appoint a plant and a worm. God works his salvation not only through people but through all the elements of his creation. Find a Bible passage about animals, birds or plants. Try to produce an 'ecological' message from the passage you have chosen?

Poetry takes over

In chapter two, the narrative assumes a poetic form as Jonah is finally driven to speak to God. His experience of being hurled into the waters resonates with other parts of Scripture. Micah anticipates salvation as God casts 'all our sins into the depths of the sea' (Mic.7.19). Hosea, a near contemporary of the Jonah, speaks of God striking 'down' and, on the third day, of binding 'up' (Hos.6.1-2). Pieces of Scripture are layered on top of each other as God effects in Jonah a death and a resurrection.

The prophet has already been in the ‘belly’ of the ship (1.5) now in God’s rescue plan he finds himself in the ‘belly’ of a fish which is the ‘belly’ of *sheol* (2.2). Fact and narrative are now transposed by metaphor and image. *Sheol* is the place of death and is pictured here as a city with gates located beneath the deepest roots of the mountains.

Jonah has been trying to escape from God but is has proved to be impossible. Psalm 139 asks ‘Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in *sheol*, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me (v.7-10).

Although *sheol*, like a cosmic ‘black hole’, swallows everything God enters this ‘underworld’ not to punish but to extract and save (Ps 139).

The psalms as inspiration for prayer

In chapter 1 Jonah remains tight-lipped until he is compelled to speak to the sailors. Now at last facing certain death he prays. His prayer is made up of quotes from the psalms. For hundreds of years the Psalter has been resource for praying Christians. Every experience of life is recorded. Joy, pain, betrayal, hate, hope, despair, anger, anguish, praise and thanksgiving; these are all set to the music of the psalms.

- ‘my distress’ *from* Ps.18.6 & 120.1
- ‘Sheol’ *from* Ps.18.4-5
- ‘all thy waves and billows passed over me’ *from* Ps.42.7
- ‘from thy presence’ *from* Ps.139.7
- ‘upon they holy temple’ *from* Ps.5.7
- ‘the waters closed in over me’ *from* Ps.69.2
- ‘my life from the pit’ *from* Ps.30.3
- ‘my soul fainted within me’ *from* Ps.142.3
- ‘into thy holy temple’ *from* Ps.18.6
- ‘deliverance belongs to the Lord’ *from* Ps.3.8

Although the musical content of his prayer comes from the psalms there are a few phrases unique to Jonah which directly describe his terrible predicament. ‘Seaweed is wrapped around his head’ as he descends into the watery grave. Helplessly entangled and enmeshed ‘the prison doors’ close behind him.

A PREACHING POINT

Prepare two prayers to go with your sermon; one of thanksgiving and one of confession. Search the psalms for inspiration. Focus on two or three of them before writing your own prayers. Use the images, metaphors or rhythms found. Where possible make use of the actual words (as Jonah has done) but add your own personal contemporary glosses.

Going down and coming up

Note the repetition of 'deep, deep, down' (v.3, 5, 6) as Jonah goes under. On the cross in his own extremity Jesus, like Jonah, prays from the psalms (Ps.22.1, 31.5). One of the commonest forms of prayer in the psalms is labelled 'lament'. We would expect the drowning experience of Jonah to dominate but what we have here is a 'thanksgiving' psalm. Jonah goes down but reaching the land of the dead he 'remembers'. In words reminding us of our Lord's triumphant shout from the cross 'it is finished', Jonah knows that God will raise him up. The prayer ends in thanksgiving as he rejoices in 'deliverance'.

Jesus refers to Jonah in Matthew 12.40. 'For as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the sea monster', so will the Son of Man be three days and nights in the heart of the earth'. Easter Saturday is regarded by many Christians as the time when Jesus went in search of humanities first parents, Adam and Eve, in order to release them and all their descendents from the prison of *sheol* (1 Peter 3.19). This cosmic act of God in Christ gives assurance and hope for all humanity. Jonah is given a foretaste of God's redemptive grace to be enacted for all. The imagery of being plunged into water and lifted out would for the Christian signify baptism.

In the New Testament letter to the Philippians, scholars have identified an early Christian hymn (Phil 2.6-11). It celebrates the downward self-emptying journey of identification made by Jesus who comes amongst us to suffer an ignominious death for our salvation. Because of his **obedience** God the Father raises him up to the highest place. Humiliation is followed by exaltation. Jonah is taken down to the lowest place because of **disobedience**. He does not, however, remain at the bottom but rather his deliverance is secured by the all encompassing love

Jesus realised that God's mission had no boundaries (Mk.7.24-29) but would stretch to the ends of the earth (Matt.28.18-20).

Jonah's recommissioning is carefully proscribed. In 1.1 he was instructed to 'arise and go'. Here the Hebrew word literally instructs him to 'walk'. He has to undertake a 900 mile journey on foot following trade routes across the desert. Plenty of time to think!

What lessons had he learnt? First you cannot escape from God and second it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Jonah had actually been to hell and back. He does not want to repeat the experience. He does not appreciate that he is taking his own personal hell within himself.

This raises the question of motivation. The mission of Jesus was driven by compassion (Matt.9.35- 10.15). There is no compassion in Jonah as he trudges across the burning sands in bad-tempered obedience. This suggests that our motives for mission may not be as significant as we sometimes think. Although Jesus tells us to love God with all our heart mind and soul what finally counts is 'obedience' (Matt.7.15-27, Matt.21.28-31).

PREACHING POINTS *Sermon title: 'God's mission not ours'* With reference to Jonah and to the New Testament texts above, write a sermon on 'mission'.

The message

Nineveh was regarded with loathing by Jonah and his contemporaries (2 Kings 14.25f). The Assyrians were the Nazi storm-troopers of the ancient world; a pitiless power-crazed enemy. The prophet Nahum directs a furious blast of hate against the city. 'I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle' (3.6). Denouncing such a city would have guaranteed Jonah's popularity amongst this own people. Jonah should have rejoiced like Nahum at the chance of passing judgment on the city. His new commission is to 'proclaim the message God gives him'. Things are no longer clear cut as before. What is God's message now?

In the Greek version of the Old Testament the word *kerygma* is used here. It occurs in only one other place in the Old Testament but is found splattered across the pages of the Gospels and Paul (1 Cor. 2.1-5). In the New Testament, it is a

‘good news’ message of deliverance. When Jonah eventually arrives at the city he proclaims ‘Nineveh shall be overthrown’. For Jonah the word ‘overthrown’ meant obliteration but there is another interpretation. God could decide to ‘overthrow’ his destructive decree and save the city (Deu.23.5). This is what happened.

PREACHING POINTS

The text says ‘God changed his mind’ (i.e. repented) (v.10). What do you make of this? There are references to God ‘repenting’ in Gen.6.7 and 1 Sam.15.11. We need to repent because of our sin. God does not sin. Repentance for God means a shift in direction. God’s purposes are not fixed within a concrete cosmic plan. God can and does change his mind because of our responses. God is always seeking through love and righteousness to redeem every event. The Bible also suggests that sometimes our prayers actually persuade God to do things differently (Gen.18.20-33). ‘Without God we cannot. Without us God will not.’ Discuss.

The city

Nineveh, founded by a king Nin-us, is ‘fish city’. Swallowed by a big fish Jonah has now of his own volition to enter another ‘big fish’. The experience is equally repulsive. He had previously prayed to God in desperation. Here he preaches to the citizens. Christians in later time would use the sign of ‘the fish’ to identify themselves and witness to Jesus. The irony of this Old Testament book would not be lost on them.

Archaeological surveys have shown Nineveh to be a vast suburban sprawl with a circumference of around sixty miles. The walled city proper, its gardens and palaces would be at the center. It was larger than modern Mosul which adjoins the ancient site. The Bible describes it as an ‘exceedingly large’ metropolis ‘three days walk in breadth’ with a population of more than 120 thousand people plus many animals (4.11). A weary disgruntled Jonah on catching his first glimpse of the city would have viewed it with astonishment and dismay. ‘The job is not only distasteful, it is impossible!’

He makes a start by entering the city shouting ‘Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown’. Even after day one he has not yet reached the centre, yet his message is having an immediate

balances the beginning. Jonah's speech in chapter 1 mirrors what the LORD says in chapter 4. Each speech is made up of exactly 39 Hebrew words. There are also parallel confessions of faith.

Anger and death

This final chapter is full of heat. The sun beats down on Jonah's head. The narrator mentions Jonah's displeasure. He is literally angry with a 'big anger'. Furious with God he is burnt up both inside and out.

Circumstances again drive him to pray as in chapter 2. This prayer, however, is not shaped or inspired by the Psalms, it is one moaning rant. He has had enough. He wants to die.

Elijah, after the Mount Carmel incident, confesses that he too has had enough. His request arises from his sense of failure. Jonah, on the other hand, is successful. His prayer is motivated by self-destructive egotism. Note the repeated use of 'I', 'my' and 'me' in verses 2-3. Job is another person in the Old Testament who has fallen out with God. After 40 chapters of argument he acknowledges the wisdom and wonder of God. Like the king of Nineveh he repents 'in dust and ashes' (42.6). There is no such outcome for Jonah. His intransigence remains.

A confession of faith.

We have Jonah's confession of faith in two parts;

I am a Hebrew

I worship the LORD the God of heaven,

who made the sea and the dry land (1.9.

I know that you are a gracious God, and merciful,

Slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,

And ready to relent from punishing (4.2).

PREACHING POINTS

In church we sometimes repeat the creed but how much of it do you believe? Read through the Apostle's Creed and spend some time reflecting on each of its clauses. How do you attempt to live your faith in a way consistent with it?

Jonah's confession of faith leaves us in no doubt about the nature of God. 'Gracious', (compassionate), 'merciful' and

‘slow to anger’. The dichotomy between Jonah’s verbal expression of faith and his own inner spirituality is brought out by the narrator. God is slow to anger whilst Jonah is not only quick to anger but nurses his anger.

The final word ‘steadfast love’ refers to God’s love for Israel within the covenant. This is a favorite word in Hosea and something Jonah would have understood. He could not, however, conceive of a divine love which transcended this special covenant relationship. He would not ascribe to the four ALLs of Methodism nor would he be able to sing Faber’s hymn:

For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind. (StF.416)

Sulking under a tree

He has been in the Nineveh for three days. He abandons it and sits moping outside. The shelter he has built is described as a ‘booth’. Such shelters were built when the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated. They were reminders of the time Israel spent in the wilderness on their journey of salvation from Egypt to the Promised Land. Does this suggest that Jonah himself is on a journey of salvation? Like the escaping children of Israel he too had passed through the waters and travelled across a desert. He has personally experienced God’s salvation and now acknowledges that God is merciful and kind. A new future awaits him but he will not let go and move towards it. What is God to do?

PREACHING POINTS

Where are you on your salvation journey? The traditional church has set up some sign posts along the way, for example, baptism, then confirmation, but what follows? Early Methodists had clear sign posts for personal growth within the 1779 hymnal and to some extent in the 1933 hymnal. It began with seeking faith, repentance, salvation, praying, watching, waiting, working, suffering, seeking full redemption and holiness. Even the situation of ‘backsliding’ was addressed.

God appointed a fish now he appoints a ‘plant’. Next day he will appoint ‘a worm’ and then an ‘east wind’. We have already come across the ‘big wind’ in chapter 1. The Hebrew

word for 'wind' is '*ruach*'. It is also the word for 'breath' or 'spirit' which in the New Testament is '*pneuma*'. This is the wind which blew across the slain in Ezekiel 37.9f and later filled the apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.2). God breathes life into the whole of creation giving the elements, the plants and animals a revelatory and redemptive role.

First the plant. Jonah certainly appreciates it. He had a 'big anger' at the start but now he 'rejoices with a big joy' (v.6). (There is a play on words here. In Hebrew the 'shade' is to help Jonah 'shed' his anger). Surely at last he will renounce his anger and rejoice in God's loving kindness? He does not. Being extra kind to Jonah does not work.

Next comes the worm. This tiny creature destroys the plant and nibbles away at Jonah's fleeting moment of joy. As the sun arose a sirocco wind blasts across the desert covering him in burning sand. He now feels even sorrier for himself than before. It is the second time the prophet has experienced the wind of judgment. This too fails to bring the prophets to his senses.

PREACHING POINTS

Do you have attacks of the 'Jonah syndrome'? The elder brother did in the story of the prodigal son (Lk.15.28). Can you think of others like this? What can be done about it?

The final challenge

God finally tries the 'how much more' argument (Matt.6.30, Luke 12.24). 'How can you pity the destruction of one plant yet fail to pity the destruction of 120,000 people?' The Hebrew word 'pity' or 'concern' literally means 'to have tears in your eyes'.

This final question is not primarily addressed to Jonah but to the Old Testament people of God. The name 'Jonah' means 'dove' and was a symbol for Israel (Ps 74.19, Hos.7.11). The question also raises issues for us who have accompanied Jonah on his journey. We leave the prophet sitting, sulking and snarling at the saved city. Over and against this I set the picture of Jesus gazing at Jerusalem and weeping because it seems to be inhabited by a host of Jonahs (Lk.19.41-44).