

JONAH – REFLECTION

(Anne Shave)

Part 1 – Introduction to the book of Jonah

What is the first thing that springs to mind when you think of Jonah? A whale or big fish?

What else do you know about this book of the Bible?

There is a lot that Biblical scholars do *not* know about it:

- No-one knows who wrote the book of Jonah.
- We don't know exactly when it was written. *But it is likely to have been at a time when the Assyrian empire was flourishing – around the same time as the books of Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah and Micah were written – ie: the 8th century BC (NIV study Bible notes)*
- We aren't even absolutely certain what sort of book it is.

Many Biblical scholars today see Jonah as primarily a parable – a moral story like the parables Jesus told as his primary form of teaching. If Jonah is a parable, then some of the questions we might have: such as whether a man could survive after being swallowed by a fish, or whether animals are capable of repentance, can be let go. On the other hand, it is the function and nature of parables to throw up questions that can be even more problematic for us – because they are questions directed at the reader or hearer. As we shall see, the book of Jonah does just that.

However, there are three arguments against the book of Jonah being accepted as a parable. The first is that it is a lot longer than most parables in the Bible. The second is that Jonah is identified as being the son of someone specific – “One day the Lord spoke to Jonah son of Amittai” – whereas parables don't usually do that (“Once there was a man who went out to sow corn ...). The third is that Jewish tradition accepted it as history. Those things being noted, anyone who accepts this book as historical must also accept that it includes a lot of hyperbole. A plant grows up in day which is large enough to provide shelter to a man ... “The Biblical narrators were more than historians. They interpretatively recounted the past with the unswerving purpose of bringing it to bear on the present and future.” (NIV Study Bible)

Jonah is in many ways a very *funny* book but it has a very *serious* purpose.

As we hear three of its four chapters read today, you might like to follow the story in your pew Bibles, from Page 895. The Good News Bible includes some wonderful pictures.

Jonah 1 – A reluctant prophet and some repentant sailors

Jonah is called by God to go to Nineveh and warn them that God is aware of their wickedness. And Jonah goes in the opposite direction.

Many of those called by God in the Bible were reluctant to do what God asked of them. Towards the end of last year we focused on the life and ministry of Moses, and you will remember how ill-equipped he felt he was to do what God asked of him, and how God responded so graciously to Moses's protests by providing him with Aaron's support, and equipping him with signs of God's powerful presence with him. But Jonah is more than reluctant. He runs away. He says that he worships the Lord, the God of heaven who made land and sea, and then he goes to sea to try to escape from the Lord!

In this chapter we are not told why. We might wonder if Jonah is frightened to do so. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and the Assyrians were the mortal enemies of Israel, responsible for the destruction of the Northern Kingdom and sending the people into exile. All we are told in this chapter, though, is that Jonah "set out in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord."

What adjectives might be use to describe Jonah?

disobedient defeatist reluctant foolish

How might we describe the sailors?

terrified prayerful reluctant to harm Jonah thankful
repentant - they offered a sacrifice and promised to serve God

There is so much humour in this story – irony and constant surprises that people don't respond the way we expect them to. The prophet runs away. The sailors are more prayerful. (And there are more surprises to come.)

As with much effective comedy, the humour jolts us into seeing things in new ways. We see other sides. We are forced to *think*. What did hearing this first chapter make *you* think about?

Let us pray.

Almighty God, when we are consumed by our own concerns and disregard the needs of others, please forgive us.

When we do not want to do what you ask of us, help us to trust in your kindness.

When we go astray, please lead us back to you.

Change our hearts, O God.

Jonah 3: The worst sermon ever preached

A man told a story about his father, who was a preacher, who was constantly being asked by members of his congregation, “Should we take the story about Jonah being in the belly of a big fish literally?” His father’s response was to say, “Frankly that’s the most believable part of the story of Jonah. The idea that people of Nineveh, including the King and all the animals, would repent – now *that’s* far-fetched!”

It seems particularly far-fetched after we consider Jonah’s “sermon”, which, in the Hebrew, is five words long. As you can see in the picture I’ve included in the bulletin, it seems a particularly odd message for a prophet sent by God to deliver. There’s no mention of Nineveh’s sin, no mention of who or what is going to bring about the destruction Jonah is warning them of, and no instruction about how they are to respond. The most notable omission from his preaching is that there is no mention of God! We may wonder whether Jonah’s heart is actually in this task. It would be understandable if it were not.

Nonetheless, Jonah has been described as “the most successful missionary in the Old Testament”! The sailors he interacts with are converted, without any effort on his part whatsoever, and then with the worst sermon ever preached the whole city of Nineveh repents. More layers of humour.

What I find moving about this chapter, though, is that God gives Jonah a second change. Presumably God could have raised up another prophet and given up on the disobedient Jonah. But he doesn’t. And this is an aspect of the story that certainly resonates with me. How about you?

In God’s response to Jonah, as well as to the repentant people of Nineveh, I am reminded of Paul’s words in his letter to the church in Rome (Roms 2): “Do you disregard the richness of God’s kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God’s kindness leads you to repentance?” The challenge for us is, of course, that (like Jonah) we may be grateful that God’s kindness, tolerance and

patience are extended to us, while still finding it difficult to extend love and mercy to others.

Let us pray:

**God of all, thank you for your great love
which extends to all people.
Help us to love others,
especially those who are different from us,
those we consider undeserving
and those we find difficult to like or respect.
Set us free from prejudice and closed-mindedness.
Change our hearts, O God.**

Jonah 4 – A petulant prophet and a loving and merciful God.

To me, the most shocking verses in the book of Jonah are the first two verses of Chapter 4. We find out here why Jonah headed towards Tarshish rather than Nineveh – he didn't want God to show mercy to the people of Nineveh. He knew that because God is loving and merciful, always ready to change his mind and not punish, God would have mercy even on Israel's enemies, the Ninevites. I'm pretty sure that these verses are supposed to come as a great shock to us, too – to make us sit up and take notice. Although Jonah has received the mercy of God, he is angry that God would show mercy to others – "Angry enough to die," he says. It's not comfortable reading, is it?

How does God respond? He asks Jonah, twice, "What right have you to be angry?" and the book end with another question, "How much more should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city?" We're not told Jonah's answer, because that's really not the point, is it? The point is, what is the reader's answer? How do we feel about God forgiving and loving *our* enemies? That's a very very difficult question.

The book of Jonah is not really a story about a big fish. It's about the grace of God, the wideness of God's mercy, so much wider than ours. It's a very funny story with a very serious point.

And it points us too, to the fact that later, there will arise a Prophet who will obey and submit to God (Phil 2:9) who will be a light to the Gentiles and who will make disciples of all nations.

Let us pray:

God our Father,

**thank you for your grace and your mercy,
your love and your compassion.
When you provide for us, may we be truly thankful.
When others are blessed by you,
help us to rejoice and celebrate with them.
May the church throughout the world
and we, in this congregation,
freely share with others
the blessings that we have ourselves received.
Change our hearts, O God.**