

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 24 JANUARY 2021

This Sunday will not happen. The minister who booked me later contacted me to say that he'd had his wires crossed, and I was not required. But not before I'd written the sermon. So, dear friends, you and you alone will be the "beneficiaries" (if that is the correct word) of my contemplations on Jonah. I shall pacify my annoyance at the minister in question by thinking to myself, "His congregation don't know what they'll be missing!" (No, not really.) I hadn't got to the point of composing Prayers of the People, so that prayer is not included in this set of material.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Psalm 62:5-12

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress;
I shall not be shaken.

On God rests my deliverance and my honour;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.

Those of low estate are but a breath,
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.

Put no confidence in extortion,
and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.

***For you repay to all
according to their work.***

But we are *so* unlike you.

Your boundless love
is met by our selective and conditional loving.

Your generosity
is met by our grasping selfishness.

Your truth
is met by our half-truths, convenient omissions and even deceit.

Your selfless regard for all
is met by our lack of vision and pathetic little worlds.

Father, we would be the people you intended us to be,
but instead, we remain in our sins.

We ask you to forgive us once again,
and to strengthen us to live more as you would wish us to.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus our saviour.

Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

If God is for us, who can be against us?
Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?
It is God who justifies.
Who is he that condemns?
Christ Jesus who died –
more than that, who was raised to life –
is at the right hand of God
and is also interceding for us.
Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
In Christ we are forgiven.
This is the Gospel.
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings** –

Jonah 3:1-4:1, 4:11

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

Is this not good news,
that Jesus Christ the Son of God has risen from the grave,
and opened for us the pathway to true life,
to forgiveness and to reconciliation with God?
So go now to proclaim that good news.
Speak the word in season,
but *speak the word*.
The gospel is not ours to hug to ourselves,
but the proclamation of God's grace to all the nations and peoples of the world.
The blessing of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now,
and abide with you evermore.
Amen

SERMON

We all know the story of Jonah. If you went to Sunday School, it was a favourite – the chap who was swallowed by a large fish and miraculously survived. I don't know about you, but I don't recall anyone ever telling me *why* Jonah found himself in the sea in the first place, or for that matter what happened afterwards. It was just a miracle story that seemed suitable for kids. It offered great opportunities for colouring in. The fact is that for most of us, the story of Jonah probably remained just a kids' story. And if we were really honest, when the story remains at that level, it's one of those episodes in the Bible that causes people to doubt the *truth* of what's in the Bible.

Well today the Lectionary offers us Jonah chapter 3 – the second half of the narrative that never seemed to figure in the kids' story. We should be pleased, because, unless I'm mistaken, this is the only occasion in the three-year Lectionary cycle when *any* portion of Jonah's four chapters is set for reading. Or at least I should have said that the Lectionary gives us *six verses* of Jonah chapter 3. I have to confess that I added in a few more verses, to give more of the flavour of this very important second half of Jonah. As we look into it, we'll see that it's far from just a benign children's story.

It's important how we approach the book of Jonah. From the very start, it's obvious that Jonah is not like any of the other books of the prophets. The story is related in the third person – that is, it's a story *about* Jonah – and makes no pretence that it was written *by* Jonah. And unlike the other prophets, there's nothing in the book that can be used to date its composition. In the setting of the story, the city of Nineveh is very prominent, but the story could be looking back to a time when that had been the case. Jonah himself is more than reluctant to undertake his mission, and does so very begrudgingly. And his actual prophecy amounts to no more than eight words in the English translation – *Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!* That's it! – and what's more, that brief prophecy makes no mention at all of God! Then the book concludes with Jonah being angry at God, and God trying to dissuade Jonah from his anger. There is truly no other prophetic book that's anything like this one.

So what *is* this book we call “Jonah”? Does it belong with the prophets at all? Should we take the story of Jonah's being swallowed, then regurgitated, by a big fish literally? Did Jonah really traverse 1000km of desert, and walk through the streets of Nineveh, proclaiming its imminent doom? I have friends who are adamant that we can, indeed that we *must*, accept these things and everything else in this very strange book as literal truth. They cannot see past the idea that we have to accept that *everything* the Bible says as *literally* true. They're afraid to let go of *anything*, for fear that they'll find themselves letting go of *everything*. And they won't consider that different books of the Bible might be of different genres.

The sad thing is that quibbling over matters of that nature distracts us from the transformative and vitally important message that Jonah both had for its first readers, and still has for us today. So I'm not here to try to argue that Jonah's adventure in the big fish really happened, or that Jonah's trip to Nineveh was historically true. I'm happy for you to believe those things, or not to believe them. The important fact is that what Jonah has to offer us, in a beautifully crafted work of literature, involves challenging and important teaching about God. None of that depends in any way on the literal truth of the story of Jonah. For myself, I prefer to see Jonah as similar to the parables of Jesus. No one really thinks that the good Samaritan was an actual person, but that doesn't lessen the impact that the story has had ever since its first telling. Jonah packs a similar punch.

At the heart of the book of Jonah is a contrast between the Israelite Jonah and the Gentile people he encounters. Jonah is the *only* Israelite in the story, and in that sense he stands for, or symbolises, Israel, or the Jews. We quickly see that the contrast between the two is far from flattering to the Jews. In the first chapter, Jonah is fleeing from God by sailing *west* on board a Phoenician ship,

when he had been called to travel *east* to Nineveh. The ship is beset by a violent storm, visited upon the ship precisely because Jonah *is* on board. So when we first meet Jonah, he is portrayed as rebellious and disobedient to God. The Phoenician sailors, on the other hand, prove themselves heroic and pious. Even though they know they're in danger because of Jonah, they still make a desperate attempt to save him. When that fails, and they agree to throw him overboard, and the storms abates, it is they who offer sacrifices and vows to God. It's a stark contrast with the disobedient Jonah. The Gentiles emerge looking far more God-fearing and obedient than our symbolic Jew, Jonah.

In chapter 3, after his encounter with the large fish, Jonah has reluctantly agreed to obey God, and has travelled to Nineveh. His instruction from God had been,

Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.

Now Nineveh, historically, was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and – *whenever* Jonah was written – every Jew knew about the Assyrians. They were ruthless, violent and cruel warriors, who had ravished all the nations in Israel's part of the world, and extracted heavy tribute from those whom they had conquered. The Assyrians were ultimately responsible for the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. So in the thinking of the Jews, the Assyrians were the *bad guys par excellence*.

At first Jonah had been afraid to go and prophecy against Nineveh. Now he's there, he starts going through the city, uttering those eight words of prophecy we saw before: *Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!* Remarkably, Jonah makes no mention of God. He does not attribute the prophecy to God at all. He makes no pronouncement to the Ninevites about by whom this curse will be carried out. That is disrespectful of God, and so, once again, the symbolic Jew in the story, Jonah, is portrayed very negatively, as lacking respect for God.

On the other hand, the Gentiles in the story, the Ninevites, just like the Phoenician sailors, are immediately respectful of God, and repent of their behaviour. From the King down to the very livestock, everyone puts on sackcloth and ashes, and fasts for the full forty days.

Who knows? they reasoned. *God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.*

And, we're told, God did indeed relent, and did not bring about the destruction of Nineveh.

As the Phoenician sailors had been spared, so now had the Ninevites. As the Phoenician sailors had been saved because of God's mercy, so now had the Ninevites benefited from the grace of God. As the Phoenician sailors had shown new respect for, and given honour to, God, so had the Ninevites done the very same thing.

But that's not the end of the story by any means. What of Jonah's reaction? Jonah was *angry* at God! Chapter 4 tells us that he was angry that God *had* shown mercy, and that he was angry because he felt *he'd* been made a fool of, because his prophecy had not come true. His anger grows and grows. He still hopes for Nineveh's destruction, and sets up to watch it happen. And when it doesn't, he says he'd rather die. Jonah's hatred of the Ninevites is clear, and it spills over into hatred of God.

But God stands in stark contrast to his Jewish messenger. God had sought to warn the Ninevites, and relented because they heeded the warning. But Jonah had delivered the warning with hatred; he certainly didn't want the Ninevites spared. He relished the idea that God was going to destroy the

Gentiles he hated. But God rebukes him at the very end of the book.

And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

While Jonah's thoughts are only for his own hatred, and his own pride, God's compassion is for the Ninevites, particularly for those yet too young even to know left from right, and for the innocent animals held within the great city.

Any Israelite, or any Jew, hearing or reading the book of Jonah would have no difficulty understanding both what it was saying about those who claimed to be God's chosen people, and about those whom they were so sure were *not* God's people. Here was a powerful challenge to the arrogance that had gripped the Jews, their belief that, because God had chosen them for his purposes, they and they alone enjoyed God's favour and God's love; indeed that God should and did hate their enemies, as they hated them. Surely God loathed the Assyrians, just as they loathed them. Remember, time and time again, in the psalms, we find calls for God to *crush* his people's enemies. That was the mindset of Jonah – God *should* have destroyed Nineveh; God should *not* have warned them and allowed them to repent. That was the mentality of Jonah, and the story of Jonah condemns this attitude in the people that Jonah symbolises.

Far more powerfully than any other book in the Old Testament, Jonah proclaims that God is not the God of Israel alone, but the God of all nations, that he calls all nations to repent of their sinful ways, that they might be spared. It proclaims too that God's mercy is far greater than God's anger and justice. God would rather *spare* the sinner than punish the sinner, because God's love is for all nations, not just for his so-called "chosen" people.

In those proclamations is a harbinger of the coming of Jesus Christ, who came, not to judge the world, but to save the world – the *world*, not just those who believed themselves specially chosen of God.

In the sparing of Nineveh is another harbinger of the ministry of Jesus, too. The Assyrians symbolised the very worst of sinners, yet Nineveh repented and believed and was spared. All Jesus asks of us is that we repent of our sins, and believe, and we too will be saved.

There are many lessons for us in this powerful book of Jonah. Let me suggest just two.

I know, and I am sure you know, many Christian folk who love to quote Old Testament passages at you, proclaiming God's righteous judgement on humankind. Their God is an angry God, in whom there seems little mercy. But when we read more deeply, even the Old Testament, we find instead a God of love and mercy – and no more so than in the book of Jonah. Jonah wanted that angry, vengeful God, but he did not find him.

And secondly, as Christians, we can very easily fall into the same kind of trap that the Jews had fallen into. We can find ourselves congratulating ourselves that *we* are God's people, that God favours *us*, and will eventually visit his judgement on others. Today's terrorists, whom we may be quite certain God hates as much as we do, are our equivalent of the Assyrians. When the Ninevites repented, God spared them. We need to remember that God's mercy can flow to *anyone*. As Wesley put it, the blood of Jesus "can make the foulest clean". If we, like Jonah, look forward to being vindicated by God's justice, we shall, also like Jonah, instead find ourselves angry at God's mercy. For God will put us quickly in our place when he says to *us*,

And should I not be concerned about those you hate, those great cities, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

Our mission, like Jonah's, like John the Baptist's, is to call on the world to repent. But we do not proclaim God's anger, the good news we bring is God's mercy. For in Jesus Christ, we have seen the face of God, and the God we proclaim is a God of grace and love and mercy and forgiveness.

Amen