

“A FISHY TALE”

1. Jonah’s Mission

Jonah 1:1-17; 2:1,19; 3:1-3a

We’re going to spend a couple of weeks looking at a book from the Bible again – as we’ve done in recent times with *Philippians*, *Colossians* and so on. This time, though, we’re going to turn to the Old Testament for our material, to a book which tells a story most of us will have heard in some version or other at some stage in our lives. It’s a short book – just four chapters – but one which, like the rest of the Bible, still speaks to us today, telling us something about ourselves, something about God and something about his grace. As you will have gathered from the reading, or from the notice sheet, or from *Vision*, it’s the little book of *Jonah*. Over the next three weeks we will look at Jonah’s Mission, Jonah’s Prayer and Jonah’s Sulk. But let’s start at the beginning.

There are all kinds of phrases that can stick in our minds from books and films and television programmes, little sayings that really become kind of catch phrases. This is one which often turns up in gangster movies, but I still clearly remember it from the things that were said in the wake of the awful atrocities of 9/11, when the leaders of the Western powers were puffing out their chests and making all kinds of ill-considered threats against those whom they suspected of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. George W Bush stared into the world’s television cameras and pronounced his message to Osama Bin Laden. “*You can run,*” he said, “*but you can’t hide.*” Well, for a while it seemed blatantly obvious that Bin Laden **could** hide, and he did so very successfully for a while. The combined might of several armies, backed up by Afghan militia and the hi-tech sophistication of the CIA, MI5 and, no doubt, other intelligence agencies, failed to smoke the fanatical leader from his hiding place for quite a while.

For Jonah, though, the opposite was true. He certainly tried running, but, as far as God was concerned, there was no place to hide. We don’t know very much about Jonah – as with so many of these prophets whose little books we find amongst these short books called “The Minor Prophets” at the end of the Old Testament. He was the son of someone called Amittai who, according to the only other mention of him in the Old Testament, in *2 Kings 14:25*, lived in a place called Gath Hepar in the region of Zebulun (and you’re probably no wiser for knowing that). We don’t know what he did or how old he was when the story took place – although there is a tradition that he was the widow’s son whom Elijah raised to life in *1 Kings 17*. All we are told about him is that God told him to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, and tell them to repent of their evil ways. Indeed, there’s a fairly strong contention by many scholars that this isn’t actually a real event but a story told as a parable. I’m not going to go into that this morning, other than to remind us that all of the Bible is inspired by God and is useful for all kinds of things and, whether it’s a factual report or a parabolic story, we can get something useful out of it.

Now Nineveh, at the time, was more or less at the furthest point east in the trading world, as far as people living around the Mediterranean were concerned. It was out on the eastern boundary of the Assyrian Empire – and it was a big city and a lawless city. Imagine being told by God that you were to go and preach to the people of Tokyo, and imagine Tokyo as being a city a bit like the one in which Judge Dredd operates. How would you respond to that?

We don't know how God's word came to Jonah – maybe an inner voice which became a deep conviction; maybe another prophet spoke to him; maybe there was some kind of supernatural sign that Jonah saw. Whatever it was, Jonah was pretty sure it was God speaking to him and pretty sure what God was saying. But although we don't know how God spoke to him, we do know what Jonah's response was. Having been told to go as far east as it seemed you could get in those days, Jonah nipped down to the harbour in Joppa and made arrangements to go as far west as it was thought possible to go – all the way to Tarshish in Spain. He was going to run – and he was going to run as far as he possibly could from where God wanted him. Of course, it was a foolish plan, because when God comes calling you can try to run, but you can never hide – as he was soon to find out.

God knew just where he was all the time. God knew he was there on the ship, even though he was scudding across the Mediterranean and trying to hide himself amongst a group of foreigners. It's almost certain the crew and the traders on board would have been Phoenician. When the storm started up they all asked him where he'd come from and what nationality he was, so he clearly wasn't one of them. But God knew he was there.

When the crew got together and decided that the only way to stop the storm was to throw the foreigner overboard, God knew where he was. (It's a jolly good job they don't adopt that method when it's a bit choppy on the Channel!) God knew where he was because he *“provided a great fish to swallow Jonah.”* He directed this great fish – whether it was a whale or some other mighty creature of the deep need not concern us – to come and swallow him whole, which would have been quite a shock to Jonah, I'm sure. You've been thrown out of a boat (and no doubt lost all your luggage and your deposit – there was nothing in the insurance conditions about being thrown overboard by the crew to calm the sea) and you're floating around in the middle of the biggest expanse of water you've ever seen, watching the boat disappear, and just when you think things couldn't get any worse, up swims a dirty great fish and gulps you down in one.

Now it would have been pitch black inside the fish and I wouldn't like to try and imagine the smell in there! Jonah would have been swilling around in a lake of stomach acid, with all kinds of semi-digested matter bumping up against him, some of it possibly still alive, all of it pretty nasty. He may well have felt fronds of seaweed wrapping themselves around him and heard the awesome gurglings of the fish's digestive

system and the rush of water through the gills. He had no idea where he was, but he didn't want to be there long. God knew where he was. And even before Jonah had started praying – it was a prayer made up of all sorts of bits and pieces Jonah remembered from the Psalms strung together in a panic stricken yell, but we'll look at that in a bit more detail next week – even before he'd started that, God knew where he was. And God knew how he was going to get Jonah to where he wanted him to be.

Eventually, the fish came in towards shore and with a mighty heave vomited Jonah on to the beach. Just imagine what you'd have thought if you'd been strolling along the shore at that moment and you saw a huge fish coming towards you and then it vomited on the edge of the sand. Out of the stinking mess crawled a man who asked you where he was. I suspect you'd have been rather surprised – but not half as surprised as Jonah. And God gave him a second chance, another opportunity to do what he had told him to do. And Jonah would have been an extremely stupid prophet to have disobeyed a second time. He'd tried to run – but he couldn't hide. God knew just where he was all the time.

God knows where each of us is at any time. He's always watching us, always following us. There's a great bit of poetry about it in *Psalms 139:7-12*. Listen to these verses:

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence.
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,'
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

And in *Matthew 10*, Jesus makes the point that our creator God even knows when a sparrow falls out of its nest, so he's certainly going to know whatever happens to us:

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

And because of his amazing vantage point, God is in a position to protect us. The fact that he knows where we are and what's happening to us is a great source of encouragement, I hope. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing – whatever other people are doing to us – God is looking to protect us. In every situation we can trust in him. That's the great **encouragement** of all this.

But it's also a **challenge**, isn't it? When we lived in London, one of the young men at our church was a *concierge* – a posh word for an ordinary job. There were three 24-storey block of flats just over the railway from the church and the borough council sold them to a housing association. The housing association smartened them up and improved the decor and the security. They put a *concierge* in each one who acted as a kind of receptionist-cum-caretaker-cum-security guard. Glenford used to sit in his little office just inside the door and watch the CCTV monitors all day. One of the cameras was concealed in the lift and Glenford said that he was constantly amazed at what people managed to do in lifts (but he'd never tell me exactly what it was). One of the things he could do if he spotted something untoward going on was stop the lift, speak to the occupants and then keep the lift closed until police arrived. He said he loved to watch the expressions on their faces when the people in the lift heard his cheerful Jamaican voice addressing them from nowhere! They didn't even know they were being watched.

God's always got his eye on us to protect us – but that also means he's watching where we go. We cannot run away from God. If he tells us to do something – whether it's one of his universal rules for looking after our lives and his world, such as we find in the Ten Commandments, or some special message for an individual about the course of their life – then he knows exactly how we respond. Yes, we can **trust** him to look after us, but we also need to **obey** him when he speaks to us. Oh yes, Jonah got a second chance, but it would have been so much easier to have obeyed the first time. And you can never really be sure how many chances you're going to get anyway.

Is there something God's calling you to do? Maybe he's calling you to commit your life to him for the first time, to acknowledge that you need him and that, through Jesus and his death and resurrection, you can be reconciled to him. Perhaps you've never taken that step and you've tried to run away from the responsibility of surrendering your life to him. You can't run for ever.

Maybe God's calling you to a specific task within his church: he has a role for you to play here in this congregation or in the wider church. You know what that is. You know the gifts and abilities you have that could be used for God, but you're scared of what it might involve. You've heard from God in all sorts of ways, and you're trying to put off that inevitable moment when you have to say, "OK, God, I'll do it." You're trying to hide yourself in other activities, in other situations, in the hope that God won't see you. You can't hide from him.

Maybe God's telling you that there's some area of your life that needs cleaning up. Nobody knows about it but you. You've managed to hide it from even your closest friends and family. But God knows what's going on. He can see through the steps you've taken to try and hide things from him – and he wants to help you out. He wants you to deal with that issue – whatever it may be, he knows – but you need to call out to

him and ask for his help. And the longer you put it off the more difficult it becomes to sort out – and you don't want to end up in the belly of a fish, do you?

So what are you going to do? You can't hide from God's call. He's watching you – to protect you and to steer you on to the right path for your life. You need to trust him that he's got it sorted out, and to obey him when he tells you what your part is in that. *“Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”* Are you prepared to stop running this morning? *“You can run, but you can't hide.”*

For reflection and discussion

- 1) How does God call people? Have you ever had an unmistakable sense of God's call? How did it come to you? How did you respond?
- 2) God watches over us to protect us. How does he do that? What protection does he offer? How can we know it is truly God who is in charge?
- 3) Does it matter whether this is a true historical account or a parable? Why/why not?
- 4) What have you learned from the story of Jonah? What are you going to do about it?