

“A FISHY TALE”

3. Jonah’s Sulk

Jonah 3,4

The last two weeks we were looking at the little story of Jonah, a prophet from Israel who was called by God to go and preach a message of judgement to the people of Nineveh. All we really know about Jonah is his name and his call from God – and the fact that he tried to run away from it. Having been sent to a great city at the very eastern edge of the world as the Hebrews knew it, he set off to go to the very western edge, to a city called Tarshish in Spain, and embarked on a boat that was setting off along the Mediterranean from Joppa.

While he was on the boat, a fierce storm blew up and the Phoenician sailors threw Jonah overboard as a way of appeasing God, so they believed. The storm subsided and the sailors acknowledged the One True God, but Jonah was left struggling for his life in the sea. He called out for help to God, who saved him from drowning by sending a huge fish to swallow him whole. From the belly of the fish, Jonah thanked God for saving him – a prayer which we looked at last week – and then the fish vomited him up onto dry land and he set off to obey God’s call by travelling to Nineveh.

If you ask most people about the story of Jonah, they will probably be able to tell you the story of the whale – even if they don’t know where it comes from – but they may not be so familiar with the rest of the story, the other half of the book. For half of the book, Jonah is running away from God’s call, and for the other half of the story he’s sulking, annoyed at God and annoyed at the people of Nineveh. So let’s complete the picture today by reflecting on these second two chapters, which we’ve just read.

Having been ejected from the great fish, Jonah makes his way to Nineveh, which was, at that time, one of the great cities of the mighty Assyrian Empire. As the story tells us, it took three days to see it properly, and it was a city that had marked itself off in God’s books by being very wicked (*1:2*). Going to preach God’s word there was not going to be easy. And the message Jonah preached was very short, it seems. Most of the prophetic books at the end of the Old Testament are full of oracles and declarations from God, but this little book is nearly all story, with just eight words in English (five in Hebrew) that record the message – *“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”* It doesn’t mention God, nor the reason for the punishment, so I suspect that this is a precis of the message Jonah preached.

But whether those were his only words or not, they had an immediate effect and the people repented straight away. They fasted, put on the clothes of mourning (sackcloth) and sat down in the dust – a sign of humility. And everyone did it, we’re told, from the King and the nobles down to the least of the citizens – and even the animals were to be included, according to the King’s declaration. This was a spectacular demonstration

of national repentance and it had an effect. At the end of chapter 3 we read, “*When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.*”

Now, if I’d preached a sermon that had that kind of effect – well, any kind of effect, really – I would be delighted, but Jonah wasn’t. He was rather annoyed with God – and he told him so. Basically, he says, “I knew this would happen. You sent me here to preach judgement and look what’s happened – it’s always the same. I came to tell these filthy foreigners that you were angry with them and were going to destroy them, and you’ve just done exactly the opposite. I give up!” God’s reply is simply that there’s no point getting all het up about it.

You see, Jonah’s problem was that he couldn’t accept that others should be blessed in the same way he was. Many people in Israel had a similar view and we see it continuing into the time of Jesus and the attitudes of people like the Pharisees. God had chosen Israel to be his people and he promised them his blessings – but they were clearly blessings that they were to share with all humanity. Israel was to be the means of God’s love and grace being spread around the world, to Jews and Gentiles alike. They were to be, in the words of Simeon’s prayer when he first saw the baby Jesus, “*a light for the Gentiles*”. God’s blessing wasn’t just for them and they were not to be jealous or discriminatory when it came to other people receiving those blessings. The trouble was, the Jews wanted to keep the blessing for themselves and couldn’t countenance the idea that God might be showing his love and grace to people who weren’t like them.

So God arranges a little illustration for Jonah. Jonah goes and sits down on the edge of the city – some people suggest that he was still waiting to see if God really would destroy the city. It was very hot and Jonah needed some shade, so just as God had miraculously provided a huge fish to save Jonah from drowning, now he provides a leafy shrub to shelter him from the intense heat. Jonah is naturally very pleased with it.

The next day, though, God caused a little worm to get into the shrub and destroy it. It all wilts away and Jonah is left unprotected. And to ram the point home, God sends a really hot wind to increase Jonah’s discomfort – and once again Jonah says “I give up” (4:8). But God speaks to Jonah and asks him what the problem is and Jonah stamps his little feet and says he’s so mad he might as well die.

And that’s when God tells him what this is all about. Jonah is upset – very upset – that the shrub has died. He had nothing whatsoever to do with it – he didn’t plant it or tend it or have anything at all to do with its growth, but he’s really angry that it’s died, even though it was only there for a few hours. So why shouldn’t

God, who actually created the people of Nineveh and included them in his much-loved creation of humanity, reach out and prevent them from being destroyed? Why shouldn't he show his compassion to 120,000 deluded and sinful people when they turn to him in repentance? If Jonah can get worked up over a single bush which he had nothing to do with, why can't God reach out to the population of a city – even though they aren't part of Jonah's people or rate very highly on his list of important groups?

You see, this all about God's grace to all humanity. He loves everyone, despite the ways in which they have rejected, ignored or disobeyed him. He loves them enough to have sent his Son, Jesus, to die for them, to take on himself the consequences of all their wrong decisions and wrong choices. His grace is limitless and reaches out to all who turn to him. So no-one has any right to limit that grace, to complain that anyone is too sinful or too different or too far away to be denied God's love.

Like Jonah, we can make some very rash decisions about who our target audience is, or who we think should be saved, or to whom we are going to grant admission to the Church. We look at others and judge them – maybe subconsciously, maybe very consciously – on the basis of their age, their education, their race, their wealth, their lifestyle choices, and sometimes get a bit hot under the collar when God clearly blesses people whom we do not think deserve it.

This bread and wine on the table this morning are a reminder to us that God loves everyone, that Jesus died for everyone. And we are called to share that good news with everyone and accept them all as loved by God. In a culture where we are constantly confronted with people who are very different from us – in terms of sexuality, gender choice, ethnic origin, educational achievement, material resources, political attitudes and all the rest – there is no place for the kind of sulky attitude that Jonah had that somehow limits the grace of God to being only for the people we like, the people we get along with. Let us share the good news of Jesus and of God's grace with everyone we can – and rejoice when they respond and allow God to transform them as he has us.

So, as we said a couple of weeks ago, we can sum up the message of this little book in the words of Douglas Stewart, "*Don't be like Jonah!*" But if that's to be the case, we need to respond positively when God calls us, thank him for his saving grace in each and every situation, and be prepared to share that extravagant grace of God indiscriminately with all humanity – or, at least, the parts of it we come into contact with day by day.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Do we still believe in a God of judgement? Should we emphasise God's judgement, the punishment of sins, in our preaching and proclamation? Why/why not?
- 2) How is Jonah's attitude sometimes mirrored in our experience? Do we discriminate according to our prejudices or not? If so, how can we avoid doing that?
- 3) Which part of Jonah's story do you think speaks most powerfully to us today? Why do you think that is?
- 4) Is here anything new you have learned through re-reading Jonah's story? What will you do about it?