

JONAH

Jonah 3. 10- 4.11

Philippians 1. 21-30

Matthew 20. 1-16

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Scholars have expended a lot of energy and paper trying to establish the *genre* of the Book of Jonah. What kind of story is it? The Book of Jonah is completely unlike any of the prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible, and Jonah himself is unlike any other prophet. In terms of the text itself, it is primarily narrative rather than poetry; and the story features Jonah as a character rather than the narrator, or God's mouthpiece. What's more, the story is filled with incredible and extraordinary manifestations, including storms on demand, whales swallowing people, and God-appointed worms (rather than the warnings, judgment, and critique we expect to find in classical prophetic books). And the story ends with actual resolution, rather than the hope of resolution. God says that he will act, and he does.

In addition, the main character, Jonah, is as un-prophetic as one can possibly be. In fact, one could almost call him an anti-prophet. It is as if God has skipped the vetting process entirely when he calls Jonah. Not only does Jonah lack the experience that is needed; he has no interest in, no passion for, and no demonstrated potential to be a prophet (at least from what we are told).

Nevertheless, the story has a prophetic flavour to it, beginning as many of the books of the prophets do, 'Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go at once to Nineveh."' Generally, we expect that with these weighty opening words, we are going to hear something from God through one of God's

prophets. But not with Jonah; he doesn't even wait long enough to hear what he's supposed to say to the Ninevites before he takes off running.

Occasionally, the prophets will come up with excuses: 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy,' cries Jeremiah (Jer 1. 6). The more persistent Moses states, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' (Ex 3. 11). Jonah, however, doesn't even bother with excuses. Instead, he runs in the opposite direction, hopping aboard a Tarshish-bound ship and hoping to get as far away from both Nineveh and God as he can.

But God doesn't let Jonah off so easily. God pulls out all the stops. He uses a storm at sea, a whale, and miraculous survival¹ to make sure that Jonah does what he has been asked to do.

Once Jonah finally arrives in Nineveh (which by the way was the great city at the centre of Assyria, ancient Israel's mightiest, most feared and hated enemy), he follows God's orders. He begins his walk through the great city – a journey of three days from one end to the other – shouting, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'² The text indicates that Jonah makes it through only one-third of the city – one day's walk – and the Ninevites put on sackcloth and ashes and begin to repent. Jonah doesn't even have to confront the king directly, because the word spreads so quickly.

Once the king hears the message, he immediately sets out a decree of fasting and repentance for the entire city. Even the animals must put on sackcloth and fast.

¹ Jonah's three-day adventure with the whale in 'the belly of hell' may be likened to Christ's three-day journey from death to resurrection; and God's message through Jonah, no matter how reluctantly delivered by the prophet, is of universal mercy to those who turn from death to life.

² Note that the Book of Nahum is a diatribe of judgement against Nineveh.

This is unheard of. People never listen to the prophets in biblical stories, at least not at first. But then here is Jonah, the anti-prophet, who made one day's walk through Nineveh with an eight-word message; and now even the animals are fasting and wearing sackcloth. The result is that God changes his mind. He doesn't destroy Nineveh.

Yet Jonah isn't satisfied. He's angry. He says, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.'

Every single prophet in the Bible hopes, prays, and dreams of the response of the Ninevites. Yet it never, ever happens this way. When they are worn out, chased, harassed, run down, and at their wit's end, the prophets can only say, 'Lord, it would be better for me to die.' Jonah, on the other hand, after one of the biggest success stories in the Bible (where 120,000 people and countless animals change their ways in one day) goes on to say, 'Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.'

God tries to ease Jonah's pain in the wake of all this success, and appoints a bush to grow and provide shade, so that Jonah can take in the great miracle from his vantage point just outside the city. Overnight a worm comes to attack the bush, and it withers and dies. Jonah wakes up to the hot sun and again begs to die. God asks Jonah not once but twice, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' Jonah never gives an inch, responding, 'Yes, angry enough to die.'

The story ends with God asking Jonah a final question, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about

Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

When we read this question from God (which actually closes the Book of Jonah), I imagine that many of us assume that Jonah changed his mind. Personally, I’m not convinced that Jonah gave in. I think that this story concludes with a truly perplexed God, a God who says, ‘Jonah, I have pulled out all the stops. I have given you a prophet’s dream job. All of the people and even the animals in the biggest city on earth have changed their ways in one day’s time. And yet you are still angry, and you still want to die.’

The Book of Jonah pushes us to see how God often works with us in spite of ourselves. Isn’t it amazing that God provides a shade bush so that Jonah can watch the unprecedented transformation of Nineveh unfold before him in comfort? And yet Jonah isn’t able to enjoy what he sees.

Before we smile at Jonah’s rebellion and anger, we might look at this last issue, the message he delivered and those to whom he delivered it, more closely. Do we really want our enemies to receive mercy? The Assyrians were known for their infamous brutality to those many nations they conquered. We could go to the Middle East, right to the lands of ancient Israel and Assyria, and see the problem this very day. Some enemies do horrible things.

But let us bring the problem closer to home. In the sphere of personal and domestic life, many cruel things happen. Animosity runs deep. In my years of ministry, people have often come with problems about forgiving, let alone loving, their enemies, as Christ teaches. Some things, it seems, are unforgivable.

A priest I know who was head of a home and school for abused children once told the story of a graduate of his school. The graduate was a woman, who came back to the priest with severe depression; and she sought his counsel. Her father had violently abused her and her brother when they were little. The father had gone to prison and had died. The woman had gone on to some measure of adult success but was dogged by depression, which she knew focussed on her father. She had lived in spite of him. She could not forgive him. The priest told the woman that he completely sympathised with her feelings. But could she let go of her father, and give him over to God? Could she give God her permission, if so be it, to forgive her father? Could she let God be God?

The woman had not considered giving over the whole business of her father's destiny to God. And what if that meant that God would show his mercy in some way? Well, it's a bit like Jonah and Nineveh. The conversation didn't work like magic, but it was a turning point for the woman. She let her father go. Without telling God what to do, she let God mind her father's business. Her depression began to lift. She had been angry, angry enough to die. And now she began to live some more.

The Book of Jonah is a breath-taking story of mercy. But in order for the story to take hold, be it then or now, we have to stop being angry, and let God be God. For as the prophet said in his complaint: 'O Lord, is this not what I said when while I was still in my own country...for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.' Perhaps, in time, we can even allow this mercy to *touch us*, so that even our deepest feelings can begin to be healed by God.

Amen.