

Sermon for Lancefield
25th of January, 2009

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

There aren't many books of the Bible that are laugh out loud funny, but the Book of Jonah is one of them. Today's reading doesn't really make sense without the context of the rest of the book, so this morning I'm going to take you through the whole Book of Jonah. That's not as appalling as it sounds, because the Book of Jonah is only four chapters long. And Jonah's story is well worth listening to, not only because it's funny, but also because together with the humour is an important exploration of the nature of God.

God tells Jonah to go to Ninevah and prophesy against it because of its great wickedness. Like many people called by God, Jonah is less than enthusiastic. Moses reminded God that he was a stammerer; Jeremiah said that he was only a boy; very few people called by God had Elijah's "here I am, Lord, send me" response. Unlike Moses and Jeremiah, Jonah doesn't actually argue with God. He simply takes off in the other direction. God wants Jonah to go to Ninevah in the East; Jonah flees to Tarshish, the furthest known point in the West; for Hebrews the far end of the world.

Not that Jonah can really be blamed for this. Ninevah was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. It represented all that was hateful, repugnant and cruel in those empires, like the Babylonian and the Persian, which had oppressed Jonah's people. The Assyrians themselves were known to be bloodthirsty, specialising in sacking and looting. Ninevah was not the sort of place to which an Israelite prophet would hope to be sent when God's call came.

So Jonah takes a ship to Tarshish. But the Lord creates such a mighty storm that the ship threatens to break up. Each of the sailors cries to his god, and they wake the sleeping Jonah and tell him to pray to his god, too. When this doesn't help, the sailors cast lots to find out on whose account the storm has come, and the lot falls on Jonah. The sailors ask him about himself and he tells them: "I am a Hebrew, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." The sailors are terrified, because they know that Jonah is running away from his God. They ask Jonah what to do, and he tells them to throw him overboard. They don't want to, and they try everything else, but in the end, they cry out to God: "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you," then pick Jonah up, and throw him into the sea. The storm ends, and the sailors offer a sacrifice and vow to God. The prophet has become an accidental evangelist as God uses Jonah's disobedience to reveal himself to pagan sailors.

Jonah, of course, doesn't die, and this is the bit of the story that everyone knows. God provides a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah stays in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. The fish isn't a punishment; it's God's way of saving Jonah from drowning. And it's in the belly of the fish that Jonah undergoes a conversion experience. He thanks God for not leaving him to drown, and acknowledges that deliverance belongs to the Lord. Then the Lord speaks to the fish and it spews Jonah out onto dry land.

Now we are back at the beginning again. This is where today's reading starts, with God telling Jonah to go to Ninevah. And Jonah now agrees, although not very happily, to bring God's message to Ninevah. He begins to walk through the city, prophesying. Just as Jonah was an unwitting evangelist to the sailors, now he is a reluctantly successful prophet. Because the people of Ninevah believe God, they proclaim a fast, and everyone in the city puts on sackcloth. It seems that it's not the strength, boldness, courage or cleverness of prophets or disciples that allows God's message to be heard, because Jonah is none of these things.

Today's reading cuts out the bit of the story that tells us the king's reaction: "When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God.'" If you don't think that Jonah is a comedy, just imagine all those

animals wearing sackcloth. Then the king says something very profound: “Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

Now we see why Jonah fled from God’s command and took ship for Tarshish when told to go to Ninevah. Jonah is a man with a strong sense of law and order, but with very little sense of love. And he wants his God to be like that, too; he wants a God who is as narrow, as intolerant, as self-righteous as Jonah himself. But he knows that this is not what God is like. He tells God: “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.” Jonah still, despite his conversion experience in the belly of the fish, doesn’t get it. He may have stopped running from God, he may have obeyed God’s command and prophesied to Ninevah, he may have been astoundingly, overwhelmingly, successful in his preaching, but he *does not like it*. He sees the people of Ninevah being disobedient and evil and immoral and he wants them pelted with fire and brimstone. He wants them to receive the punishment that they deserve! Instead they repent and God relents. And so Jonah sulks. He goes out of the city and sits down. God makes a bush grow to give Jonah shade, and Jonah is very happy about the bush. But when dawn comes the next day, God sends a worm to attack the bush and it withers. When the sun rises, God prepares a sultry east wind, and the sun beats down on Jonah so that he’s faint and asks to die. Jonah is not a happy prophet! In fact, he is a sulking, childish prophet.

This book of the Hebrew Scriptures is amazingly universal. The Jerusalem Bible commentary says that “all the characters of this story are likeable, the pagan sailors, the king, the populace, even the animals of Ninevah, all except the only Israelite on the stage – and he a prophet!”¹ And since it *is* a book of the Hebrew Scriptures, since it’s collected together with the prophetic books of Amos and Micah and the rest of the twelve Minor Prophets, the story of Jonah is a critique of the prophets from within, it’s self-critical. For those who read it, Jonah is us. Sadly, in so many ways, Jonah is us. He is, as one commentator describes him: “lord of the half-hearted, tribal chieftain of those who want God only on their own terms”.² I don’t think there are any of us who don’t at one time or another, want God on our terms. The Book of Jonah is a satire of the kind of discipleship that isn’t open, that doesn’t really understand the nature and breadth of God’s grace. I don’t think there are any of us who at times don’t want God to reward those we see as good and punish those we see as wicked. We want God’s justice. But this book tells us that God’s love and God’s mercy outweigh even God’s justice.

We don’t know whether Jonah comes to accept God’s perspective. The book ends with God’s explanation to Jonah of God’s actions: “Then the Lord said, ‘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?’”³ One commentator describes this as “God [consoling] the pouting Jonah like a mother explaining the justice of the world to an angry three-year-old.”⁴ We don’t know if Jonah the pouting three-year-old heard, understood, and accepted God’s explanation. We *do* know that we see in the Book of Jonah God’s extravagant, unbroken concern for both the evil *and* the complacent, for Ninevah *and* Jonah, for prostitutes *and* Pharisees, for our enemies *and* ourselves. We do know that we see in this story the counter-intuitive morality of the Bible that has Samaritans as good neighbours; stutterers as law-givers; revelations of God in the sound of sheer silence; and compassion shown to evil cities like Ninevah. The comedy of the Book of Jonah is a revelation of God’s love and concern for the whole creation, whether or not we think that parts of the creation deserve it. And for that we should give thanks to God. Amen.

¹ Quoted in Father Edward J O’Heron, ‘You can run but you can’t hide’ *US Catholic*, Sept 1994.

² Mark Buchanan, ‘Running with Jonah’ *Christianity Today*, Nov 15, 1999.

³ Jonah 4:10-11.

⁴ Mary W. Anderson, ‘Thy will be done’ *The Christian Century*, Jan 5-Jan 12, 2000.