

## **Sermon for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 7 November 2021**

### **Learning from Jonah (Jonah 3.1-5, 10)**

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ... When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”

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If I ask you what first comes to mind when you think of Jonah, then I’m guessing it’ll be something about Jonah being swallowed by a whale. Even if you didn’t picture it quite the way Pieter Lastman does on the cover of our service sheet. Jonah and the whale tends to be the favourite Sunday School bit of the prophet’s story. The question I want to reflect on with you this morning is this: what does Jonah have to teach us today? Why might this be an important story for us at All Saints?

In order to answer this question, we really need to look at the whole book of Jonah. We need to get a handle on the entire story, not just the whale incident. So, I’m going to offer you a condensed version of the story; and then we’ll think about how the story of Jonah connects with Jesus; before reflecting on what Jonah has to teach us today.

Let’s remind ourselves of the essentials of the story. The Lord God speaks to Jonah and commands him to go to Nineveh, the greatest city of the day, and to call its inhabitants to repentance because of their great sins. Jonah’s reply to God is this: ‘Not on your nelly.’ Instead of accepting God’s invitation, Jonah rushes down to the coast, and jumps on a ship going to Tarshish, in the opposite direction to Nineveh. After they’ve set sail, the ship is caught in a terrifying storm. The sailors are convinced that one of their number has offended against God. Eventually they work out that it’s Jonah. Jonah then recognises that he needs to sacrifice himself if the whole shipload of people is to be saved. He therefore tells the sailors to throw him overboard. Which they duly do. Only God hasn’t yet finished with Jonah. The Lord sends a big fish to swallow him up. Jonah remains in the belly of this great fish for three days and nights before being spewed out again onto dry land. Jonah is now safe. But more importantly the ship and all aboard her are safe also.

That’s part one of the story. Part two, where our reading begins today, starts with a sort of double-take. The Lord God speaks to Jonah a second time. ‘Get off your butt, Jonah,’ God says, ‘Go and tell the Ninevites the message that I’ll give you.’

Reluctantly, this time Jonah does what he's told. He goes preaching across the length and breadth of the city: 'You're facing God's wrath. God's going to destroy you all. You've got just 40 days to repent. Or you're all for it.' Much to Jonah's astonishment, the king and people take heed and listen to him. They stop eating any food, dress in spartan clothing, and ask God to have mercy on them. God is so impressed, God changes his mind about wiping them out, and leaves them in peace.

Happy ending? No, because this conclusion really winds Jonah up. He gets angry with God: 'How can you let all these people off the hook when they've lived such sinful lives? I knew that you were a merciful and loving God – that's why I ran off to Tarshish in the first place!' Jonah then goes off into a sulk, and throws himself down outside the city. A plant grows up and gives Jonah shelter, which he's happy about. But then the plant dies, and Jonah is left without any shelter from the burning sun, and bemoans his fate: 'It's better for me to die than to live,' he says.

The Lord then challenges Jonah. 'Do you have any right to be angry?', God asks. Jonah remains bitter: 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then God comes in with a punchline: 'You're concerned about the plant, which you did nothing to nurture. Should I not be concerned about the great city of Nineveh, full of many thousands of people, who've completely lost their way, and don't know their right hand from their left?' And with that question, the story ends.

What's this story of Jonah all about? A little context may help us. The book of Jonah was written shortly after the Jewish exile in Babylon. It was a traumatic time for the Jews. They worried that they'd be assimilated into the surrounding culture. So, their leaders sought to keep them as separate and distinct from their neighbours as possible. But, they wondered, what had God really called them into being for? They also puzzled over how God had treated them, and how the Lord had allowed their land and temple to be destroyed by foreign invaders, who then carted them off into exile. If they'd deserved punishment for their sins, surely their enemies deserved even more severe punishment? Those were the questions circulating at the time that the book of Jonah was written, and which the story tries to address.

The book of Jonah is therefore a parable, in which Jonah represents the entire people of Israel. The parable is trying to address the fundamental question of what it means to be the special people of God. Part of the answer lies in why they were first called as a people. They were called, as the Lord told Abraham, to be a blessing to the nations, and a sign of God's love for all peoples. They weren't called just for their own sakes. God wasn't saying that they were more special than the other nations.

They were called because God wanted them to share the good news of God's loving mercy with all the other peoples of the world.

The story of Jonah therefore reflects the story of Israel. They're called to be a blessing to the Gentiles, to model God's ways, and to love their neighbours. But instead, the Jews fail in their calling, and fall into the ways of the peoples around them. And their failure culminates in their despatch into exile in Babylon. That's what the story of the whale or the great fish is about. The Jewish exile is Jonah's three days in the belly of the beast. And the Jews' return to Jerusalem is Jonah being spewed onto dry land. But back in Jerusalem they face the reality of their destroyed temple, and the demise of their kingdom – and especially they face the demise of the Davidic line of kings – represented by the death of the plant towards the end of Jonah's story. And Jonah's despair, is the despair that the Jewish remnant are then tempted into. For the big question that the Jewish remnant are left with is this: where's the promised Messiah going to come from, if the kingly line of David has died out?

Which brings us neatly to the question of how the story of Jonah connects with that of Jesus. If you know your gospel stories, you'll remember that Jesus identifies himself with Jonah. It's a bit of an odd thing for Jesus to do, because Jonah is anything but a model Jew. Rather, Jonah is a comic figure. He's the most grumpy, depressed and uncooperative prophet of them all. But Jesus identifies with Jonah. When asked for a sign by the Jewish leaders of his day, Jesus refuses to give them a sign – other than the sign of Jonah. Have you ever wondered what Jesus meant by that? I think there are two ways in which Jesus is the sign of Jonah. One is that his life echoes the journey in part one of Jonah: Jesus is the entirely faithful Jew who comes to proclaim God's love to both Jew and Gentile. He is sacrificed in order to save the rest of humanity. He dies on the cross, going down into death, the belly of the beast. And after three days he rises from the dead. So, Jesus lives out the Jonah story. But Jesus also answers the question that's left at the end of Jonah's story about where the Messiah is going to come from. *He* is the sign that Jonah and the Jewish people have been waiting for. He is the promised Messiah, in the line of David, born not as a king, but as a servant of all. And just as Jonah was a phenomenally successful prophet, whose preaching brings about a mass repentance by Nineveh's thousands of inhabitants; so, Jesus is the prophet who'll bring about the repentance of billions of inhabitants of the earth.

I'm hoping that by now you've got a new appreciation and respect for the significance of the book of Jonah; and that, when you get home, you're going to open up your Bible and give the full story a read. It's a short story, and won't take you more than 20 minutes. Hopefully you've now got a framework for better understanding it.

But we're still left with the question we started out with: what does Jonah have to teach us today? Why is this an important story for us at All Saints?

The reason that this story is important for us, is that the story of Jonah is a reminder that God's got a great sense of humour. If you doubt that, then I suggest that you need to go and have another look in the mirror. Because the funny thing is that God's got a plan for sharing the good news of God's love with the people of our city and our neighbourhoods. And that plan is you. You are – we are – today's Jonah, God's choice for reaching our neighbours. Now you might possibly be thinking that if we had a Billy Graham among us, then we'd have no problem converting our neighbours; or that if we had a Mother Theresa among us, then we'd have no difficulty offering such sacrificial service that people would be drawn to Jesus; or that if we had a Desmond Tutu among us, that we could successfully challenge the structures of injustice in our nation, and that people would turn to follow Jesus in response. But God's sense of humour is this: much as God loves those exceptional saints, God has chosen you and me to be the ones to share the good news with our neighbours. Look around you, and go look again in the mirror. And have a good laugh. Because we are today's Jonah.

You might not have seen yourself as a prophet. And you might have about as much enthusiasm as Jonah had for sharing the good news of God's love with your neighbours, and calling them to repentance. But that's what Jonah's story reveals to us: we are Jonah; and God's call to us, is the same as God's call to Jonah. God's not called us because he wants us to show up for a church service each Sunday. God's called us to be a blessing to others, and to share the good news about God's love with our neighbours.

So, how are you going to respond? Are you going to hop on a plane to Majorca? Or are you going to tramp the streets of your neighbourhood to tell people that Jesus loves them? Just as it was Jonah's choice, so the choice is yours. God doesn't force your hand. You can turn your back, and try running in the other direction. But the invitation is loud and clear. It's you and me that God's looking to.