

Sermon 7 November 2021- Cockfield
Jonah

Jonah 3.1-10
Mark 1 14-20

The story of Jonah and the whale is a Sunday School favourite and must be one of the most well-known in the Bible, but how much do we know about Jonah, himself? Do you know where in the Old Testament you would find the story? In the Pentateuch (the first five books in the Bible, from Genesis and Exodus to the laws of Moses)? Or in the historical books, Judges, Kings etc? Perhaps in the wisdom books, like Job, the Psalms and Proverbs, or finally in the prophetic section alongside Isaiah and Jeremiah? The choice is yours, as Cilla Black would say! Surprisingly the book of Jonah is one of the prophetic books and Jonah was actually a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam, between 788 and 747 BC and we will put this in context later.

Prophets were given a message from God to deliver; we need to consider what message the book of Jonah is conveying. The Apostle Timothy wrote that “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:...” We also know that Jesus frequently referred to the Hebrew Bible with approval and expected the Jewish leaders to know it well. He even referred to the story of Jonah, when debating with the Pharisees (Matt 12) and drew an analogy with Jonah’s three days in the fish with his coming three days in the tomb.

To understand the lessons the author has been inspired by God to teach us, we need to remind ourselves of the earlier part of the story.

In Chapter one, Jonah is told to go to Nineveh “that great city and cry out against it...” Most prophets were told to deliver an unpopular message to a ruler or someone in Israel, but Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a pagan city. Assyria became the most powerful and aggressive empire in the Middle East and in Jonah’s time (around 750BC) was attacking its neighbours and had a fearsome reputation for brutal treatment of its enemies.

Nineveh was a truly magnificent city. I visited the British Museum exhibition of Ashurbanipal who was the ruler at the height of the Assyrian empire. I saw sculptured marble murals of enemies being impaled and dragged through the streets. The city gates were guarded by colossal lamassu, which were protective gods carved out of stone, often depicting lions with wings. The inhabitants were proud of their status and were convinced that they and their protective gods were invincible. Imagine having to walk past a pair of lamassu and tell the Assyrians that a foreign god from a small neighbour said they were wicked and must repent. The messenger would undoubtedly be mocked at best or more likely paraded through the streets, impaled and tortured. Can we blame Jonah for wanting to flee God and head in the opposite direction?

He boarded a boat for Tarshish, a port on the straights of Gibraltar, about as far from Nineveh as one could get. Jonah was sufficiently confident of his plan that he went down below the deck of the wooden sailing boat. He had paid his fare, he hadn’t done anything wrong and surely the Lord didn’t really mean him to go to Nineveh, so he lies down and goes to sleep. There is then a violent storm, the sailors are convinced the boat will sink and they will drown. Jonah had clearly forgotten the words of PS 139 “(Where can I go from your

spirit or where can I flee from your presence?.....If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, [you are there])". He is woken and told to help save the ship. Jonah realises that it is his disobedience that has caused the storm and tells the sailors that they must throw him overboard, which they eventually do. The storm immediately quiets, the ship is saved and Jonah is swallowed by a giant fish, provided by the Lord.

After three days in the belly of the fish, Jonah sees sense and prays to the Lord, his God. Surprisingly the prayer is more like a thanksgiving psalm. After describing his terrible ordeal and what it was like to nearly drown, Jonah thanks God for his deliverance. At this, the Lord spoke to the fish and Jonah was spewed onto dry land.

We don't know how Jonah got back to civilisation, but the Lord hasn't given up on him. Today's reading starts with an almost identical message telling Jonah to go to Nineveh, preach what the Lord says and tell them to repent or else. Belly of fish, or fierce and aggressive Nineveh? What a choice facing poor Jonah! The danger of going to Nineveh was bad enough, but the Assyrians were a cruel arrogant race and Jonah had no wish give them the chance to repent and be spared the fate they richly deserved for their aggression. However he has learned that fleeing the Lord is futile so off he trots.

Amazingly the people of Nineveh believed the God of Israel, proclaimed a fast and put on sack-cloth, a sign of repentance. The king of Nineveh even joins in. I think the author is being humorous to make a serious point when he paints a picture of even animals repenting in sack-cloth. When the Lord saw their repentance he changed his mind, just as they hoped, and the city was spared, much to Jonah's disgust.

Earlier I said that the important point of the story was to look for the lessons it was designed to teach.

The first is that God does speak to us and it is up to us whether we listen and obey. The less we listen, the fainter the voice of God gets. The consequences of not listening and obeying are unlikely to be as dramatic as those in the case of Jonah, but we will lead unfulfilling lives. Can we really claim to be followers of Jesus and then wilfully refuse to listen to him? In the well-known parable of the houses built on rock and sand, Jesus says that everyone who hears his words and acts on them is like the wise man who built his house on rock. He went on to say that "everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like the foolish man who built his house on sand" (Matt 7)

Even if the message we hear sounds impossible, we must learn to trust God. When I have had a difficult calling, I have asked others to pray with me, or Lynn and me together, to work out a way forward.

Secondly, trying to flee from God is fruitless. We may relax and think we have got away with it, but sooner or later we will face the consequences. Whilst the ship was sailing serenely on, Jonah went below decks to sleep and forgot about God. When life is going smoothly, how often do we forget about God? Jonah slept through the violent storm when everyone else was doing everything they could to save the ship. Do we want to be Christians comfortably asleep while everyone else is working flat out?

The third lesson is prayer. Most of us find prayer-times difficult. The most successful of my friends are the most disciplined in their prayer lives. Jonah prayed in the smelly belly of a fish. Even in the most difficult of situations it is possible to pray - ask Terry Waite! We mustn't put off prayer just because we are in a difficult place. Note that Jonah's prayer was one of praise and thanksgiving.

Fourthly, if we are faithful to God, he is faithful to us. (Actually he is faithful even if we aren't!) In worldly terms, Jonah's task was impossible: A stupid suicide mission.

However, God was able to achieve a miraculous result. There have been a number of occasions where I have felt called to go to a strange and frightening place, only to find that God has gone ahead of me and prepared the way. I have then been surprised at the outcome.

Finally Jonah had to tell the inhabitants of Nineveh to repent. These days in our post-modern society, the words “repent” and “sin” are not popular or used often. In our passage from Mark, Jesus told the inhabitants of Galilee to repent and believe in the good news. What does repent, actually mean? It means to change direction from heading the wrong way to the right way. The theme of repentance and the need to change direction runs right throughout the Old and New Testaments. The right direction is to follow the Lord or Jesus and his teaching. The good news is that this leads to eternal life. Jesus taught us to love others as ourselves. As one example, Cop 26 is in the news and one way of showing love to others is to look at our wasteful habits and change to a more sustainable lifestyle. Whatever our lifestyle, listen to God and hear what new direction he wants us to take.

A postscript after a time for reflection.

So far we have covered three out of the four chapters. What happens to Jonah in the fourth? Sadly we don't have time to cover that here. Have a look at the book of Jonah, when you get home. You will find it towards the end of the books of prophets, just before the New Testament.