

Epiphany 3 Year B 2021

We all know the story of Jonah, don't we? The Book of Jonah is listed in the Bible as part of the prophetic literature, and yet it is quite different in character, and I think, in purpose, to the rest of the prophetic writings. Whilst all the other prophets are primarily concerned with Israel and Judah, their writings filled with oracles passionately urging the people to observe Israel's covenant obligations to God, the story of Jonah is one of a mission to the Assyrians in Nineveh, written in the form of a satire - and not one you should take literally.

'It must be true, it's in the Bible', some people say. But are we really meant to take the story of Jonah literally, or is it just a tall tale - a joke? It starts with an outrageous premise - Jonah's improbable assignment - 'Go to Nineveh', and his outlandish response - heading off in the opposite direction, as if to hide from God. And then the disaster at sea, played for laughs, which ends up with Jonah being swallowed by big fish. How ludicrous is that? The problem with the story is not how a man (who, incidentally is never called a prophet) how a man could live for three days inside a great fish - a fish which is an instrument of divine judgement, and salvation, on Jonah for running away and not doing what God has commanded - no, the problem which the story addresses is the unbounded mercy of God in the face of overwhelming wickedness - and Nineveh was a by-word for wickedness.

This story was probably written during or just after the exile in Babylon, the first half of the fifth century BC, when the Jewish people were struggling to understand their relationship with God and trying to devise means of living in small communities in foreign lands amongst pagan Gentiles. So, if God's mercy is one theme of the story, another is the relationship between Jew and Gentile. The Gentile sailors on the boat on which Jonah seeks to escape from God, those who throw Jonah overboard in an attempt to calm the storm, they change from fearing the storm and crying to their gods to crying out to the Lord and fearing him, converting immediately to the God of Jonah, whilst the unrepentant Jonah vows to make a sacrifice of thanksgiving (if he survives) in the temple of the God he has disobeyed. And then the fish spits him out - and that is where today's reading begins.

'The word of the Lord' comes to Jonah for a second time - 'Go to Nineveh'. What is he to do? Can he run away again?

One of the problems for Jews reading this story of a merciful God was that they thought He had been unmerciful to them. Biblical tradition explained the exile in Babylon as God's punishment for the Jews' neglect of covenant laws, but Jews now living amongst foreigners soon realised that the ethical norms and behaviour of the surrounding people were more abhorrent than their own. If we deserve punishment, they asked, how could God possibly spare others whose offences were much more serious? Add to that question the belief that the suffering

of the present generation was caused by the sins of past generations (to the third or fourth generation) and you can see that lives are hopelessly determined by the past. If that is the case, how can God be merciful, especially to the Gentiles, if the people currently alive repent of their sins and truly change their ways? The future is determined by the past, surely?

Jonah is a caricature of the biblical prophet but he is also a man, like Job, struggling to make sense of God's actions. Whereas Job is angry because his suffering is undeserved - how can God let this happen? - Jonah's problem is undeserved forgiveness. And that is easy for us to understand.

Don't we always want wicked people to get what is (or what should) be coming to them? So we identify with Jonah - the wicked deserve to be punished.

A second time, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, and this time he goes, although he still holds to the belief that Nineveh deserves no second chance - no opportunity to hear the word of God, no chance for repentance. Nineveh should be destroyed! And yet he knows that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and bounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing. There seems to be no justice in the world, and he would rather die than live with that. He likes 'forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed'. He doesn't like God changing his mind in the face of repentance and change of ways.

But look - God has not punished Jonah for his disobedience - he made the fish vomit him up on dry land - and there is no word of admonishment - just the command, for the second time - 'Go to Nineveh'. And after God forgives the city of Nineveh, he teaches Jonah, with just a little discomfort, that he is indeed a God slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, the Lord who can forgive Jonah, the Ninevites, a thief beside him on the cross, a bunch of deserting disciples, a Saul who has persecuted his followers, and yes, incredibly, even you and me.

In the very last verse of this story God asks Jonah 'Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?' Like Jonah we are quite sure we know on whom God should pour out his wrath and yet He seems to forgive the most unlikely people - just as well, really.

Robbie Burns, in his poem Tam O'Shanter, mentions a woman - I think it is Tam's wife - sitting by the fire, nursing her wrath to keep it warm. We can only say Thank You to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for doing the exact opposite.