

Sermon on Jonah 4 And the Answer is...??

So, most of you in your time in the church will have at some point heard a really bad sermon.

I remember my mother one day coming home from church and telling my father charitably that that was the worse sermon he had ever preached.

I don't know what you look for in a bad sermon, but for me there are two things particularly which render a sermon not really great.

Firstly, a bad sermon is one which presents the Christian faith as a litany of easy answers to difficult questions.

As if suffering, for instance, can be explained away in a couple of easy moves.

Secondly, a bad sermon is one which has a 'theological' section where the passage for the day is 'explained' and then a 'practical' section where the preacher sets out the implications for living.

While I'm not going to elaborate on these two features of bad sermons, suffice to say when they come together in the one sermon, you've hit the jackpot.

What both reflect, though, is a will to sew everything up.

To have things neat and tidy, orderly, rigid.

To assume we can fully comprehend God, and obviously our comprehension is right.

As if an open question with which we must continue to wrestle is a problem, not a blessing.

As if Scripture is like a shopping list where the items can simply be bought one at a time until the list is finished.

If we are sincere about our faith, we never stop learning or growing or maturing, we're never complete in that sense.

There is always more growth to go, always more questions, always more to reflect on, always more human formation into God and God's loving-kindness to come.

“Salvation is to be realised in growth’, as Rowan Williams says, ‘and not to grow is to fall away.”

The conclusion to the story of Jonah, if indeed we can call it that, anticipates further, ongoing reflection about humanity’s relationship with God.

If, as I’ve suggested, we do best to read it as a parable, a story with a message, its open-endedness is very in keeping with the form.

We’ve reached the end in our four week series on this prophet who ran away from God, but not the end of Jonah’s message and implications.

The book finishes with an open question which gestures towards an answer, but does not provide one.

Jonah thinks he knows God, knows what God should be on about and how God should act, and this ain’t it.

God shows mercy to the Ninevites, the arch enemy of the Hebrews, and to Jonah, the text records, this seems very wrong and he became angry.

He suspected God might just be merciful enough to spare the Ninevites and he didn’t like that thought.

It’s as if Jonah wanted to say – you are our God, not theirs, we are the chosen people, not them, we deserve your mercy, not others... of course the very idea of ‘deserving mercy’ is an oxymoron – it doesn’t make sense.

In chapter one Jonah fled westwards into the Mediterranean to get away from this thought that God’s loving-kindness might be broader than he hoped.

Now he has the proof, he goes eastwards out of the city of Nineveh in the opposite direction, further and further into the desert.

This means that after his proclamation, and the Ninevites’ repentance, and then God’s repentance, he has walked through the width of the city and out the other side.

Maybe he has seen the Ninevites (and their animals let’s not forget!) from one end of the city to the other in sackcloth, turning from their violent ways, and all the while he has been cursing that they are being forgiven.

So after a little conversation, a strange little enacted parable of the gourd and the worm and the shade, God leaves Jonah with a question to ponder...

‘And should I’, God says, ‘not have concern for the great city Nineveh, in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and also many animals?’

And that’s it.

Left hanging.

That’s the end of the story, at least that which is written down.

It’s like on Q&A where Tony Jones gets a bit of a difficult question from the audience and says, ‘I’ll take that as a comment.’

Not a bad strategy for church meetings really...

We could well imagine Jonah saying the same!

He may not want to answer God’s final question directly, because the answer may be a grudging ‘yes’.

Well, if you absolutely have to God you can be concerned with the plight of these enemies of mine, but really I’d prefer it if you weren’t.

Jonah’s final words in the story are ‘I’m so angry, I wish I was dead.’

Yet it is God who has the final word – and it is a question designed to push Jonah to grow, to learn, to listen.

Ever merciful in every way, God does not coerce Jonah from his ungenerous view, but rather, in the best sense, seeks to convert him.

Seeks to place before his eyes a vision of what the hymnwriter called ‘the wideness in God’s mercy.’

It is not at all coincidental that in this wonderful story, everyone and everything repents – the sailors, the King, the Ninevites, and their animals, and of course God repents of the destruction he was going to bring upon them – but not Jonah himself.

Jonah is the only character in the book, who does not repent...save, I suppose, the whale...even the sea repents of its storm!

The wonder of the story is that because it is left open ended, we are left to decide if we think Jonah ever did.

It is truly remarkable that this story has been written down, preserved, and perpetuated in the Hebrew Bible, as it is a prophetic parable designed to shake the prejudices of narrow Hebrew parochialism.

It is meant, in its original context, for Hebrew ears and Jonah represents the people as the one who burns with anger against God's mercy to Israel's enemies.

Somehow Jonah seems to have forgotten that at the heart of Israel's election and vocation was that they were to be a 'blessing to the nations'.

Their chosen status as God's beloved was as much for the world as it was for them.

Like ours today, their faith was not their own possession.

It existed for the sake of the world, God's world, even, shockingly, their worst enemies –

- remember that in the SOTM Jesus calls his followers to 'love their enemies', for the simple reason that God loves them too; that God's loving-kindness is as much for them as anyone.

Want to be God's people??

We better get on board with this way of living, Jesus seems to want to say.

There is an obvious parallel to be drawn here with the parable Jesus tells of the prodigal son.

The elder son burns with anger that the younger upstart who wasted his inheritance should be welcomed home by his father with such fanfare and non-judgement.

He, the elder son, has been at his Father's side, working away all these years... and he is repaid with a party thrown not for him, but for his wayward brother, recently returned.

Like Jonah, in that parable the response of the elder son is ultimately not known.

It is left open.

'We had to rejoice and celebrate', says the father, 'for this brother of yours who was dead, is alive again, he was lost, and is found.'

That's where it ends.

What the elder brother did next with his judgement and resentment, we do not know, just like Jonah.

The question is left open.

I'll take that as a comment.

Clearly, though an answer is imagined by the story... could the elder brother, like the Father, show grace?

The history of the church reflects the fact that so often we have acted and felt just like Jonah.

Who was it who said the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history?

We have seen ourselves as the new elect of God on whom God would pour favour.

The idea with which Jonah struggled so greatly, that God's love could extend beyond the boundaries of what he deemed reasonable and appropriate, the church has equally struggled with.

Jonah may have represented the Jews in the story's original context, but he could equally represent the church's attitude to its own place in God's providence down the years.

In a painful irony of history, it has often been the Jews themselves, Jonah's own people, and God's elect, whom the church has burned with anger against, sometimes with terrible and unspeakable consequences.

So quickly the church forgot that Jesus was not only a Jew himself, not only the Jewish Messiah, long promised by the prophets, but God's chosen embodiment of the whole people, of the whole nation.

As Jesus opens his arms to all on the cross, Jew and Gentile, so the Hebrew people of whom Jesus is the great embodiment, bless the entire world.

Just as, when Gentiles accept Jesus as Lord through faith, they bless the Jews by bearing witness to what it means to receive the gift of God's Messiah, sent to earth.

In other words, we need each other.

Our faith makes no sense without the story and history of the people of Israel.

Surely, this is close to what Paul meant when he wrote in Ephesians, 'For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... '.

Jew and Gentile, Hebrew and Ninevite are gathered together in Christ.

What poor old Jonah doesn't really see is that the Ninevites' repentance and acceptance reflects *exactly* the purpose of his own faith and life within the people of God.

He, and his people, have 'blessed the nations', represented by Nineveh, through this remarkable story of grace.

In some strange, obscure way, the city's repentance ought to be a blessing to him as his proclamation of the word of the Lord has been a blessing to them!

But as we're all aware, in the heat of a resentful heart, it can be very difficult to see things clearly.

The reality is that almost without thinking we imagine ourselves as righteous, as the righteous ones, like Jonah.

We see others as unrighteous, not like us.

We simply can't help it.

We imagine the older son has a fair point about working hard all the years.

We work hard too. We practice our faith.

We imagine Jonah in his anger has a fair point about God forgiving the merciless and violent oppressors of Israel.

All these years in the church we've heard the message of grace, but somewhere in the confines of our heart we think we still have an exemption from living by it.

Well, of course I'm gracious to others, unless that person who has only recently come to church starts wanting to have a say about things.

Of course I'm gracious to others unless their children make noise in worship.

Of course I'm gracious to others unless there is even a single small preference of mine which has to be let go to make space for them.

We practice grace, with our own conditions.

I remember a church meeting many years ago now where an elder had told the story of a situation of great need, looking to the Church council to offer support.

There was a family of new arrivals to the country and they had nothing, but they lived some distance away from our church.

Could we help?

On hearing the story another elder, a stalwart of the church for decades, simply said, 'What's this got to do with us?'

He couldn't imagine why people out of our immediate orbit, might be part of our responsibility as a church.

You could imagine Jonah saying the same thing.

'What's Nineveh got to do with us?

Other than that they are a constant threat?

What's Nineveh got to do with you God?

In every possible respect, they are a long, long way away.'

So the deep irony of the story emerges.

Set out with comic humour and imagery for 4 amazing chapters.

It is the very mercy and grace Jonah so resents the Lord offering to Nineveh, that he is as much in need of as anyone.

The Ninevites don't know their left hand from their right.

But Jonah does.

Jonah is of God, a prophet of the Lord, of the people of God.

He has sung a psalm of God's greatness from the belly of the fish, he has seen the Lord calm the seas and rescue the sailors, now he has seen Nineveh saved – and all its animals.

He knows this is all reflective of God's nature.

'I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God', Jonah says in verse 2 of this last chapter, 'slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.'

He knows, and he is still resentful.

Still angry.

It's still grace with conditions.

I'll take your loving-kindness as a comment thanks God, not a question directed to me about how I am to be...

The question the Lord leaves Jonah with at the end of this wonderful story is, 'Who are you Jonah?'

Will you live up to your true identity?

Your true calling, your true identity?

Will you reflect my loving-kindness and mercy, being slow to anger and quick to forgive?

Who will you be?

We never hear Jonah's answer of course.

As we, the church, the people of Jesus Christ sit here millennia after this story was first told, so the same question rings out to us.

It does not have an easy answer, we will need to keep on wrestling and praying and living, and growing.

Will we, as followers of the one who laid down his life for the world, be who we are truly meant to be?

Made to be?

Called to be?

Will we continue to grow into our God-given identity?

Will we rejoice in God's mercy wherever it is shown, and live it out ourselves?

In the church, in our wider lives and families?

With each other and all the world?

Will we?, the book of Jonah wants to ask us?

And the answer is...??