

Sermon on Jonah 2 In the Belly of the Paradox

So the bit we all remember! Jonah and the whale... or great fish as the text says. Jonah meets his nemesis!

You've received a call and commission from the Lord.

You've ignored it.

In fact, you've run in the opposite direction.

You've jumped on a boat and on the way a bad storm has come up.

It's life threatening.

The sailors on the boat blame you and throw you overboard hoping to retrieve the situation.

At this the sea becomes calm so they worship your God.

Meanwhile you've sunken down to the depths where a great fish has swallowed you up.

In other words this probably hasn't been the best day of your life.

So what's the obvious thing to do at this point?

Well pray a psalm of thanksgiving of course.

It's like another great Woody Allen line: 'I'm not that afraid of dying', he says, 'I just don't want to be there when it happens.'

Fair enough.

The comic nature of the story is on show as Jonah prays from the belly of the great fish.

The prophet is pretty articulate for such a dire situation.

This in turn reinforces what I suggested last week that the best way to read Jonah is as a parable; a story designed to convey truth imaginatively, making use of humour, exaggeration, and rather implausible plot lines, along the way.

It's in this sense not unlike great works of fiction in the Christian tradition with a similar intent... think John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or CS Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

Yet as with all such literature we do well not to press allegorical meaning in Jonah too far, particularly the image of the great fish.

It could possibly represent a number of things.

The story must stand on its own and deliver its own truths even while it may gesture in certain historical directions.

In Chapter 2 Jonah, the runaway prophet from Israel, is in the belly of the paradox, the catastrophe, the tension.

There's no hard and fast way to resolve it... we must take the story on its own terms.

He is in the depths of the realm of death having run from the call of the Lord.

Where to from here?

The prayer itself is actually rather conventional, employing numerous themes which we find scattered all over the OT and the new.

Repentance, crying out to God from the depths, thanks and praise, remembrance, warnings against idols, they're all represented here.

It is the context which makes this prayer so amazing.

Jonah is swallowed by the great fish, there for three days and three nights, and then as we're told in verse 10 of chapter 2, 'vomited onto dry land.', not a particularly palatable image if we're honest.

In fact, one commentator suggested this is the only time in the Bible where vomit is spoken of positively.

Now there's something we all can be cheered to know.

Jonah's descent in fleeing from the Lord reaches its deepest depth in the belly of the fish, and it is precisely at that point, remarkably, he is able to pray, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'

It confirms the biblical belief that God goes down to the depths to rescue his people.

That there is no hole, no valley, no pit, no exile from the presence of God we can fall into which will drag us out of the reach of God's loving kindness.

Good news indeed.

However far we run from God, God never runs from us.

If, as is likely, Jonah was written post the Babylonian captivity, you could see clearly how this narrative would have spoken to the people of God's collective experience of exile.

In the belly of the great fish, the Babylonian empire, yet never abandoned by God, and eventually spat out and led back to the homeland of the people.

This pattern of salvation out of the depths of death carries on into Christian theology of course.

In early pictures of the resurrection, it is not just Christ emerging from out of the grave, but the whole host of the faithful dead who have gone before him, beginning with such great biblical figures as Abraham and Sarah.

The risen Christ is often depicted pulling people up and out into the new life of the resurrection.

Matthew gestures in this direction by being the only Gospel to record that when Christ was raised so were many of the faithful dead from all over Jerusalem.

In the Apostles' Creed, one of the earliest of the Christian creeds, we pray that Christ, 'descended to the dead', and on the third day rose again.

'Grace, assumes a declension.', as Ray S Anderson put it.

What he means is the whole notion of salvation is predicated on the idea that there's something we need saving from.

Jonah needs rescue from the belly of the fish.

The Hebrew nation needs liberation from Egypt and later Babylon.

All the people of the world need emancipation from the slavery of sin and death.

We all need rescuing from the modern cult of the individual; the idea that what makes us truly human is fulfilment of our will, our needs, our selfish desires.

Very quickly, even in the church if we're not careful, the self displaces God at the centre of things.

Faith is about giving ourselves away for the sake of Christ and the world.

This is how we find our true humanity in God's eyes, our true personhood.

Rowan Williams rightly says we are called to be persons, not individuals.

There is quite a difference.

Recognising the chains of self-centredness helps us throw them off as we follow after Jesus by faith, the vocation we were made for.

The story of Jonah points to the story of Jesus as we said last week.

This connection is recognised specifically as the Gospels record Jesus' own words about the 'sign of Jonah'.

God's salvation for the world did indeed emerge out of the depths of death.

Jesus is risen from the dead, thereby consigning it to powerlessness forever.

When the world was in the belly of the catastrophe of sin and evil, God sent Jesus into the world to rescue us.

When all seems lost, Jesus is still Lord.

God is still in control.

There is still hope.

Jonah's prayer reflects this wonderful reality of divine love.

'But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.', he exclaims, 'What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'"

It is not coincidental that the Greek name 'Jesus', derives from the Hebrew name 'Joshua', and literally means, 'God is salvation.'

To put it succinctly, Jesus is God's salvation, poured out for us.

If you've read the rest of the story, though, you'll know there's a huge tension here.

Jonah may be praising the Lord from the belly of the fish, but following God's change of heart towards the Ninevites not long after, Jonah is going to get angry.

The rescue he receives after praying to God so fervently is not, at least in Jonah's eyes, appropriate for the Ninevites, even in spite of the city's repentance.

Jonah is fickle.

He runs from God, is consumed by the fish, he prays with earnest faith and hope, is saved, just like the sailors above him on the boat, but then gets angry with God when mercy is extended elsewhere.

Again Jonah represents our humanity so acutely.

We too are fickle creatures.

We go through times of feeling centred in God, then times of feeling a long way away, we run, we hide, we get angry or into trouble, we think it's just not worth it.

We feel resentful of others or mean spirited.

There's just about no more competitive place in the world than a theological college.

We'd sit there in chapel listening to each other preach, not to hear the word of the Lord you'll understand, but the theological deficiencies in each other's presentation.

Or to make note of the strange mannerisms we all possess.

Far more important of course.

We would then point them out mercilessly to each other at the lunch after the service.

Talk about short sighted!

Young ministers coming out of college often want to tell themselves that they won't be like other young ministers believing they know it all already.

Of course, by the time you're needing to tell yourself that, it's a pretty sure thing that's exactly what you're thinking!

We praise the Lord in amid our failings and fragilities.

We lift up our voice out of the belly of the brokenness of life.

Jonah is spat out on dry land.

And he must continue to figure out where God is leading and calling him.

And how he will respond.

This too is our challenge.

We won't ever resolve this tension.

We, like Jonah, will continue to live in the belly of the paradox, praising God, yet continuing to run, seeking his face, yet turning away.

But faithful living can never be robotic.

It must be, well, lived, breathed, exercised.

So, we come to the end of chapter 2 and Jonah's great psalm out of the belly of the fish.

As you will have gleaned, there is more to come.

More intrigue, more desperate events, more tension.

There is more of God's graciousness and love to come.

And so it is for us in our living, in our following today.

More grace, more love to come.

With Jonah we may well say, praise be to God, salvation comes from the Lord. Amen.