

Jonah The Jinx

Jonah 1 & 2 26/4/20

Jonah would have to be one of the best known names in the Bible, wouldn't he? Just about everyone has heard the story of Jonah and the whale even if they don't know the details. When a cricket commentator says how well a batsman's doing and he gets out a couple of balls later, what do the other commentators say? "You've Jonahed him!"

But you know, there's a bit more to this story than just a morality tale of someone who brings bad luck to those he travels with because he's disobeyed God. Jonah is one of those Old Testament books that point forward so clearly to the gospel and its implications for us as Christians.

In fact, the main character in this story isn't Jonah at all; nor is it the whale. The main character is God. Jonah is one of the supporting characters, along with the king of Nineveh and his people but the thrust of the story revolves around God and his purposes for the world.

The book begins with a brief statement: "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'"

Jonah, it seems, is a prophet: one of those people who brought God's messages to his people. But this message isn't for God's people, it's for the people of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, one of the great world powers of the time; the equivalent perhaps of Russia or China today. And they were a military power, intent on conquering all the surrounding nations. Some years later they'd attack the northern kingdom of Israel and defeat it and take its inhabitants away to other countries. Their strategy for control of their conquests was that once they'd defeated a country,

they'd take the population away and replace them with people from another nation that they'd also conquered. That's how the Samaritan people came into existence.

So they were enemies of God's people and rightly feared.

Well you can imagine Jonah's reaction when he hears this instruction from the Lord. He would have been both surprised and upset. I mean, it was OK to speak God's words to his own people. They had a deep respect for the word of prophets. But those Assyrians were dangerous. What were they going to say when he turned up with this message of God's judgement?

And in any case why would he want to stop God's judgement from falling on these terrible people? No, give them some more rope so they'll hang themselves. Don't warn them of the error of their ways.

You know, it seems to me that we have a somewhat conflicted attitude to judgement. We don't like to talk too much about God judging people the way he says he's going to judge the people of Nineveh. This idea of an Old Testament God of wrath puts people off, doesn't it, even if it isn't the whole picture, as we'll see next week? No, we'd rather talk about God's grace. That is, unless someone does something like that man a few weeks ago who set his wife and children on fire. Then we want to know God will judge him harshly. When Mr Hunt, our health minister, suggested that the police should throw the book at that couple who ignored the need to self-isolate after returning from Aspen, we all heartily agreed, didn't we? You could think of a dozen examples like that couldn't you? Perpetrators of domestic violence and child abuse, drunk drivers, crystal meth addicts who cause untold damage to the people they come across, teenage gangs. We're happy for them to be judged by God.

Well, Jonah wasn't that much different from us. He thought those rotten Assyrians deserved to be punished. No way did they deserve a warning.

So what does he do? No sooner has he been given this message than he hops on the first ship going in the opposite direction. Instead of perhaps going on a ship to Tarsus he boards one going the opposite direction, to Tarshish in Southern Spain; anything but have to take this message to Nineveh.

So was it just the belief that they didn't deserve to be warned that was going through his mind as he made this instant decision to run? Or was it also fear of what they might do to him? That would be understandable wouldn't it? Or was it that he didn't think they'd listen to him? Or perhaps he thought that they'd just laugh at him?

I wonder do you have those sorts of thoughts when it comes to talking to people about your faith, let alone sharing the gospel with people? Do you sometimes think that people might laugh at you if they knew you were a Christian? Do you worry, worse still, that the church has lost so much of its reputation that people might look down on you?

If you're thinking about telling someone about the invitation God gives to them to come to him, do you maybe think, even subconsciously, that they wouldn't listen even if you told them, so why bother? Are there socioeconomic groups that we discriminate against with our sharing of the gospel? Those who are not educated enough to understand what we're saying? Those who are too educated for us to approach with any sort of confidence? Do we sometimes think that people with successful careers and busy lifestyles won't have time to be committed to God? It's an easy trap to fall

into isn't it, to keep our mouth shut because we've prejudged the outcome?

Well, that's certainly the trap that Jonah falls into. It doesn't seem to take him long to make his decision either. No sooner has he been given this message, than off he goes to Joppa to find a ship going as far away as he can get. But when God decides something needs to be done, he makes sure it happens. It's no use Jonah trying to get away, because God's watching. As Jonah himself says, 'He's the God of both the sea and the dry land'. No-one can escape his reach.

So what happens? God sends a huge storm that batters the ship to the point where the sailors are afraid it might break up. And what do they do? They pray, each to their own god, and then start to throw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship.

Jonah meanwhile is fast asleep below. The captain wakes him up and tells him to start praying in the hope that his god might be of more use than the others.

Now sailors are renowned as being superstitious and this is just such a case. There must be someone on board who's causing this storm. And in this case their superstitious beliefs prove true. They cast lots and the lot falls on Jonah. He confesses it all. In fact he's apparently already explained that he's running from the presence of the LORD, but once he explains who the LORD is: that he's the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land, they're terrified. They can't believe that he'd be so stupid as to try to run away from a god like that. So what can they do? Well, he tells them "throw me into the sea and it'll calm down."

Well that sounds a bit like murder so they keep rowing to try to get the ship back to land but to no avail. Eventually they give up. They pray to the LORD asking for forgiveness for

shedding innocent blood, since it is the LORD who's sent this storm, then they throw him overboard and the storm ceases.

Notice the irony here? Even in that moment of despair and humiliation Jonah is an agent for the gospel. We're told "Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows." Here's Jonah, running away because he doesn't want the Assyrians to repent and on the way he becomes the cause of these sailors coming to believe in the God of Israel.

Well, it probably won't surprise you to know that God sends a great fish which swallows Jonah and for three days and nights he's inside the fish, before being spat up on the shore. It's not a very pleasant way to learn a lesson, is it? What must have been going through his mind as he lay there in the fish's stomach? What a fool I am! Why didn't I do what God told me? It wasn't such a difficult message. I was afraid of the Assyrians, when it was God I should have been worried about! Then we're told he called out to the Lord in his distress. He repents and reaffirms his vow of service to God, and God hears him and rescues him.

It's such a well know story isn't it? But what do we do with it? What relevance does it have for us?

You know, there's another story about someone being sent to share a message from God that we find in the New Testament. It has a number of resonances with Jonah's story.

This story is not of a prophet but an apostle, Peter. There's no whale but lizards and snakes and birds instead. Peter's journey, like Jonah's begins in Joppa but when the message comes he's already been made ready to do what God is asking.

It's recorded in Acts 10. Cornelius, a Roman officer, sends his servants to ask Peter to come and tell them about Jesus. While the servants are on their way Peter receives a vision from God. Do you remember the story? He sees a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds on it. And Peter's told to get up, kill something and eat it. Well, Peter's a good Jew, so he'd never eat anything that was unclean and he says so. But God says to him, "Don't call anything impure that God has made clean." Peter sees this vision 3 times, just to make sure he hasn't missed the point. Then Cornelius' servants arrive and Peter realises that the vision isn't about food at all; it's about sharing the message of the gospel with people who are outsiders.

Now there's a strong parallel between Jonah and Peter in this instance isn't there? Just as the Assyrians were the sworn enemies of Israel, so Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army of occupation. So it wasn't only that Cornelius was a foreigner, a Gentile. He was also the oppressor. Yet Peter was told to go and share the gospel with him, because the gospel is for all the nations. It's for those who are enemies as well as for our friends. Steve reminded us of this on Good Friday, The invitation is to anyone who'll come.

As we'll see next week, Jonah provides us with an example of how God wants the gospel to be preached. God doesn't want anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance. The gospel is meant for all people irrespective of nationality or education or income or gender or employment status or whatever.

Like Jonah and Peter, we've been given a commission to go and tell people that God cares how they live, how they

respond to him. Unlike Jonah, though, we have a greater message to proclaim. That is, that Jesus, through his death and resurrection has made it possible for us to be reconciled with God, brought back into his family, adopted as his sons and daughters.

Jesus' last words to his disciples were “¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mat 28:18-20). Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” (2 Cor 5:18-20)

The first thing we can learn from this story of Jonah is that God is serious about warning people of the judgement to come. God wants people to know of his love and grace and we're the ones he sends to do it. Even if we're worried how that message might be received, even if we doubt whether our friends will listen or be interested in it, God wants us to pass that message on. And just as God used Jonah's simple explanation of who his God was to change the minds of those sailors, God can use the simplest of words from us to get people interested in hearing about who Jesus is.

Next week we'll see what happens when the gospel is preached boldly and without fear. For now, remember that when you talk about your faith to someone, God is speaking through you and when God speaks things happen.

