

22 January 2012 - Epiphany 3

Readings: Jonah 3:1-5,10; Mark 1:14-20

Jonah is not a long book, just 1200 words, so it quite feasible to read all of it in a sitting, or during one service.

The book of Jonah is placed among the Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. A prophet is one who brings God's message to the people, most often in a series of oracles or proclamations - "thus says the Lord".

But Jonah is not like that.

Jonah is a story, and a very funny story at that. It is well-written and very memorable – who hasn't heard of Jonah and the whale... even if it was a big fish.

It has been carefully crafted, using good story-telling techniques, like repetition and direct speech and exaggeration and suspense and surprise twists.

Is it true? Ah, that's a very good question. What is true?

"Jonah son of Amittai" is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, so clearly the central character is meant to be identified to some extent with this historical person. Jonah son of Amittai was a prophet, associated with King Jeroboam, king of Israel, the northern kingdom, during one of the most successful and prosperous periods of Israel's history.

But the book of Jonah has nothing to say about Israel - unlike the book of Amos, written during that historical period which addresses issues in Israelite society.

Some of the language used in this book suggests that it was written after the exile – at a time when Israel was trying to work out what it meant to be God's people.

Was this an exclusive privilege, which made them better than everyone else, something that no one else was entitled to?

Or was this an inclusive invitation to be the people through whom God could fulfil God's purposes for the whole world?

But Jonah is apparently not concerned with Israel – God calls Jonah to go and preach somewhere else entirely...

Jonah 1:1-4

One day the Lord spoke to Jonah son of Amittai. "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it;

I am aware of how wicked its people are."

Jonah, however, set out in the opposite direction in order to get away from the presence of the Lord. He went to Joppa, where he found a ship about to go to Tarshish. He paid his fare and went aboard with the crew to sail to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

Let's unpack that a little:

Nineveh – capital of Assyria, superpower in the 8th c. Assyria was a by-word for brutality in the ancient world. The Assyrian Chronicles describe horrendous acts of torture which were employed to create fear and submission among the enemies of the empire. Ancient Nineveh was known for its lawlessness and violence.

Tarshish – most likely Spain, the farthest end of the known world, across the sea – and the sea for the Hebrews was the image of God-forsaken chaos.

And if Jonah is a prophet, he is a pretty strange one. A prophet is one who speaks the word God gives him to speak. A prophet is obedient to the word he receives from God. But Jonah hears God's word - and goes in the opposite direction. He heads off to sea, to the far end of the sea, with the deliberate intention of getting away from the presence of the Lord. Did he not know Psalm 139? – "Where shall I go from your presence? If I take the wings of the morning or dwell at the farthest reach of the sea, even there you are with me, your right hand holds me fast."

Let's read on in the story of Jonah:

Jonah 1:5ff

But the Lord sent a strong wind on the sea, and the storm was so violent that the ship was in danger of breaking up.

The sailors were terrified and cried out for help, each one to his own god. Then, in order to lessen the danger, they threw the cargo overboard.

Meanwhile, Jonah had gone below and was lying in the ship's hold, sound asleep.

The captain found him there. "What are you doing asleep? Get up and pray to your god for help. Maybe he will feel sorry for us and spare our lives."

The sailors said to each other, "Let's draw lots and find out who is to blame for getting us into this danger." They did so, and Jonah's name was drawn. "Now, then, tell us! Who is to blame for this? What are you doing here? What country do you come from? What is your nationality?"

"I am a Hebrew, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made land and sea. I was running away from the Lord.

The sailors were terrified. "That was an awful thing to do!" The storm was getting worse all the time. "What should we do to you to stop the storm?"

"Throw me into the sea, and it will calm down. I know it is my fault that you are caught in this violent storm."

Instead, the sailors tried to get the ship to shore, rowing with all their might. But the storm was becoming worse and worse, and they got nowhere. So they cried out to the Lord, "O Lord, we pray, don't punish us with death for taking this man's life! You, O Lord, are responsible for all this; it is your doing." Then they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and it calmed down at once. This made the sailors so afraid of the Lord that they offered a sacrifice and promised to serve him.

At the Lord's command a large fish swallowed Jonah.

From deep inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God – a prayer based on the scriptures, particularly the Psalms. It's as if Jonah was using the words he had known all his life, weaving them into a prayer.

Jonah 2:

In my distress, O Lord, I called to you, and you answered me.

From deep in the world of the dead I cried for help, and you heard me.

You threw me down into the depths, to the very bottom of the sea, where the waters were all around me, and all your mighty waves rolled over me.

I thought I had been banished from your presence and would never see your holy Temple again.

The water came over me and choked me;

the sea covered me completely, and seaweed wrapped around my head.

I went down to the very roots of the mountains, into the land whose gates lock shut forever.

But you, O Lord my God, brought me back from the depths alive.

When I felt my life slipping away, then, O Lord, I prayed to you, and in your holy Temple you heard me.

Those who worship worthless idols have abandoned their loyalty to you.

But I will sing praises to you; I will offer you a sacrifice and do what I have promised.

Salvation comes from the Lord!

Let's continue to read Jonah's story -

Jonah 3:

Then the Lord ordered the fish to spit Jonah up on the beach, and it did. Once again the Lord spoke to Jonah. He said, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to the people the message I have given you."

So Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to walk through it. Jonah started through the city, and after walking a whole day, he proclaimed, "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown!"

The people of Nineveh believed God. So they decided that everyone should fast, and all the people, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth to show that they had repented.

When the king of Nineveh heard about it, he got up from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat down in ashes. He sent out a proclamation to the people of Nineveh: "This is an

order from the king and his officials: No one is to eat anything; all persons, cattle, and sheep are forbidden to eat or drink. All persons and animals must wear sackcloth. Everyone must pray earnestly to God and must give up their wicked behavior and their evil actions. Perhaps God will change God's mind; perhaps God will stop being angry, and we will not die!"
God saw what they did; God saw that they had given up their wicked behavior. So God changed his mind and did not punish them as God had said he would.

Jonah was a prophet who had heard God's word - and then turned and headed in the opposite direction. But God gave Jonah a second chance.

And this time Jonah was obedient.

He went to Nineveh, that great and terrible city, and preached a five word sermon –

In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown!

No embellishment, no explanation, no mention of God, no possibility of hope.

Just the starkest of warnings – Nineveh will be overthrown.

Jonah preached his 5 word sermon of doom – and the people believed.

They believed, not Jonah, not even the sermon – they believed God. And they repented.

Repentance doesn't mean feel hugely guilty, it doesn't even at its heart mean feeling sorry – it is an action more than a feeling.

At its heart repentance means turning around and going in a different direction. The people and the king of Nineveh demonstrated repentance – they prayed, they gave up their evil ways and their violence. They turned from what they had been doing and began to act differently.

Why? Because they believed God.

Actually, what they did fulfilled Jonah's prophecy. He had said “Nineveh will be overthrown”. That's a word that is used to describe something being flipped over - a bowl, a chariot on a battlefield, a piece of flatbread cooking in a pan. It carries the sense of reversal, of inversion, of things made topsy-turvy.

Jonah said to the Ninevites, "You people are going to be flipped, reversed, turned over by the power of the sovereign God. Your whole city, your whole world, will be turned over - what is up will be down, and what is down will be up."

And isn't that exactly what happened? The people repented, turned around or upside down, changed their minds so thoroughly that they lived differently.

And God responded to what they did.

God changed his mind about what would happen next. God also repented – turning around and going in another direction.

Really, everything had turned topsy turvy, everything has been overthrown – or had it? What about Jonah? Let's finish the story to find out:

Jonah 4

Jonah was very unhappy about this and became angry. So he prayed, "Lord, didn't I say before I left home that this is just what you would do? That's why I did my best to run away to Spain! I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind, and always ready to change your mind and not punish. Now then, Lord, let me die. I am better off dead than alive."

What right do you have to be angry?

Jonah went out east of the city and sat down. He made a shelter for himself and sat in its shade, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh.

Then the Lord God made a plant grow up over Jonah to give him some shade, so that he would be more comfortable.

Jonah was extremely pleased with the plant.

But at dawn the next day, at God's command, a worm attacked the plant, and it died. After the sun had risen, God sent a hot east wind

Jonah was about to faint from the heat of the sun beating down on his head. So he wished he were dead. "I am better off dead than alive," he said.

But God said to him, "What right do you have to be angry about the plant?"

Jonah replied, "I have every right to be angry - angry enough to die!"

The Lord said to him, "This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do

anything for it and you didn't make it grow - yet you feel sorry for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!"

Why did Jonah refuse to obey God's call in the first place? Was it because the task was too great? Was it because he feared for his life if he went to Nineveh, a city with such a reputation for wickedness and violence? Was it because he did not feel worthy of the task God had called him too?

No – it turns out that Jonah disobeyed because he knew God.

He knew that God was gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

Jonah wanted to see Nineveh overthrown. And he feared that if he proclaimed God's warning to Nineveh, they might pay attention, and turn away from their wickedness, and then God would forgive them.

They didn't deserve to be forgiven! They didn't deserve to be treated graciously. They deserved all the destruction that was coming to them.

Jonah is a story that says a lot about repentance. In chapter 3 we have seen Nineveh repent and turn from its wickedness and violence. And at the end of the chapter God changed God's mind and did not punish Nineveh.

But what about Jonah? Will Jonah repent? Will Jonah be able to turn from his self-righteousness that longs for the destruction of Nineveh? Can Jonah learn to love even his enemies as God loves them? Is Jonah willing to turn and think and live differently?

Think about the lengths God goes to in the story as God seeks to bring Jonah to a place of repentance, of turning and acting differently.

First God called Jonah to take God's message of threatened doom to Nineveh. And Jonah ran in the opposite direction, was even willing to drown in the sea rather than follow God's call. In response God saved him in the belly of the fish, gave him new life.

Then God called him a second time, giving him another opportunity to respond obediently - and Jonah does go to Nineveh, and does proclaim God's message. But is he seeking what God is seeking – the repentance of Nineveh – or is he looking forward to watching its overthrow?

Then God models the repentance that God wants Jonah to learn, as God turns away from the punishment that had been declared. But even though Jonah recognises that this is in fact God's true nature – he doesn't want anything to do with it. It makes him very angry – so angry he wants to die.

Finally God provides an object lesson, the acted parable of the shade plant. Jonah feels sorry for a plant, and yet doesn't have the same level of concern for Nineveh, not even for its 120,000 children and many animals.

Will Jonah now learn this lesson? Will Jonah turn around and go in a different direction, seeing Nineveh as God sees it, sharing God's concern for its inhabitants, both human and animals?

We don't know, because the story ends with a question, leaving it wide open – and in that question we find ourselves addressed.

Do we recognise God as the one who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, ready to turn from punishing? Is that the God whom we know in our own lives?

Will we allow God to be gracious and compassionate and loving towards others, particularly towards the people that we really think deserve a bit of a rark up?

Do we recognise the Jonah in ourselves, and do we recognise the places and people who leave us feeling self-righteously superior whom we want to see brought to justice and condemned and punished?

Are we willing to be challenged, to be changed by God's topsy-turvy grace and to learn how to live it out in our lives ?

Hear the gospel reading for today, from Mark 1:14, 15: Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."