



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

16 August 2020: Matins Sermon

The Tenth Sunday after Trinity

Jonah 1, 2 Peter 3:14–end

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‘The Sign of Jonah’

One of my favourite Woody Allen lines is this. If you want to make God laugh, tell him your future plans. The story of Jonah is hardly a barrel of laughs, but for anyone with a vocation, it ought at least to raise a wry smile. For Jonah has a sense of purpose, and is indeed dedicated to it. And yet, he suspects that not all will go according to plan, almost from the outset. The story is one that teases us with the sheer fickleness of God’s grand plan and the total inadequacy of our own plans. Packed with prayers, petitions, it begs more questions than it can ever answer.

Jonah is my favourite book in the scriptures, and not only because it is short, but because of its utter profundity. It has four chapters, several prayers, a rather improbable story-line, and is the only book in the whole canon of scripture to end with an explicit question to both its reader and subject. The question, put in modern idiom, is God speaking: ‘why should I not be concerned?’. And the question ends, tantalisingly, with the line ‘and many cattle’. God, it seems, is even bothered with the beef herds.

Jonah son of Amittai appears is a prophet from Gath-Hepher (a few miles north of Nazareth) active during the reign of Jeroboam II (c.786-746 BC), where he predicts that Jeroboam will recover certain lost territories. Jonah is also the central character in the Book of Jonah. Ordered by God to go to the city of Nineveh to prophesy against it "for their great wickedness is come up before me". Jonah seeks instead to flee from "the presence of the Lord" by going to Jaffa and sailing to Tarshish. A huge storm arises and the sailors, realizing this is no ordinary storm, cast lots and learn that Jonah is to blame. Jonah admits this and states that if he is thrown overboard the storm will cease.

This is all very well, but the sailors still try to get the ship to the shore; but in failing feel forced to throw him overboard, at which point the sea calms. Jonah is miraculously saved by being

swallowed by a large fish specially prepared by God where he spent three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17). In chapter two, while in the great fish, Jonah prays to God in his affliction and commits to thanksgiving and to praying what he has vowed. God commands the fish to vomit Jonah out. God again orders Jonah to visit Nineveh and to prophecy to its inhabitants. This time he goes and enters the city crying, "In forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown." The people of Nineveh believe his word and proclaim a fast. The King of Nineveh puts on sackcloth and sits in ashes, making a proclamation to decree fasting, sackcloth, prayer, and repentance. God sees their works and spares the city at that time.

Displeased by this, Jonah refers to his earlier flight to Tarshish while asserting that, since God is merciful, it was inevitable that God would turn from the threatened calamities. He then leaves the city and makes himself a shelter, waiting to see whether or not the city will be destroyed.

God causes a plant (in Hebrew a *kikayon*) to grow over Jonah's shelter to give him some shade from the sun. Later, God causes a worm to bite the plant's root and it withers. Jonah, now being exposed to the full force of the sun, becomes faint and desires that God take him out of the world. But God says to him, "Are you really so very angry about the little plant? (or "The good is what you are angry at!" - according to a traditional Jewish translation).

You were upset about this little plant, something for which you have not worked nor did you do anything to make it grow. It grew up overnight and died the next day. Should I not be even more concerned about Nineveh, this enormous city? There are more than one hundred twenty thousand people in it who do not know their left from their right, as well as many animals! (Jonah 4:9-11)

Jonah, like most of us, is a reluctant follower. He is reluctant to go to Nineveh because he suspects all along that God hasn't got the bottle to carry out the threats he, Jonah, is supposed to warn them of. Jonah suspects God is soft. He thinks that the Ninevites will say sorry, God will say OK, and that will be that. And he's right. So Jonah quits before he's begun. And that's where the story begins. He goes down into the belly of the ship, where his rebellion festers and gestates. He is taken to the belly of the whale through the storm, and learns what Paul Murray calls 'the pregnant lesson' of God.

Jonah has chosen not to listen to God; he hides in the womb of sleep and the womb of the ship – safe from the storm, and safe from God's call. But from this womb of rebellion, Jonah is sucked in deeper into the darkness and chaos of the sea, and of the giant fish. But here Jonah does not die.

He lives in the darkness, and is eventually spewed out through the very jaws of death onto dry land. Jonah's prayer is from the belly of the whale – the waters swirl around, and he is trapped. It is from there he calls to God.

There is an important lesson for us here, just in the first half of the book. According to the philosopher, John Macmurray, there is a critical difference between good religion and bad religion. Bad religion says: "Trust in God, pray to God and fear not, and God will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you". Yet good, or mature religion says something different: "Trust in God, pray to God and fear not – the things you most fear probably will happen to you – but they are nothing to be afraid of".

The difference is explored at length in the Book of Jonah. Most of what Jonah fears happens. But the book is about learning to live with that, and not resenting God for God's will being done. God spares Nineveh. God raises plants; God sends a worm to destroy it. He spares the cattle. Don't complain. Learn to live with it. The lesson for our time could be hardly be more pertinent. Indeed, it comes up in our Epistle from 2 Peter 3 – patience and fortitude are required; stay faithful.

Over the years, I have realised that as a reluctant theologian, occasional dissenter and cage-rattler, and as a priest, that I identify strongly with Jonah. And I wonder if you do too? It would be much easier to say "no". But as you know, all evil needs to flourish is for good people to do nothing. Do something; not anything; but try and make sure you do the right thing. But we are all human, and sometimes it is easier to withdraw, and refuse the conflict. Modern lives prefer short-cuts and making alternative travel plans. One contemporary Polish poet talks about a modern-day Jonah, and how he would deal with the call to Nineveh – by avoidance:

The modern Jonah
Goes down like a stone
If he comes across a whale
He hasn't even time to gasp
Saved
He behaves more cleverly
Than his biblical colleague
The second time he does not take on
A dangerous mission
He grows a beard

And far from the sea
Far from Nineveh
Under an assumed name
Deals in cattle and antiques
Agents of Leviathan
Can be bought
They have no sense of fate
They are functionaries of chance

In a neat hospital
Jonah dies of cancer
Himself not knowing very well
Who he really was
The parable
Applied to his head
Expires
And the balm of the legend
Does not take to his flesh.

The prayer lesson of Jonah is not about petitioning God for what we want. It is, rather, being honest before God about who we are and what we hope for. It is about waiting in the belly of the whale, in the deep. It is about patience, pregnancy, gestation. Prayer is a slow, patient business, in which our wills are entwined, and desires changed as our spirituality deepens.

In one of the darker moments over these last few years, and when all had seemed very bleak to me, Emma wrote this poem. She's been writing very fine perfectly publishable poetry for a few years now, since the loss of Chaz, her younger brother. This one is called "*Another Economy*", and it rejoices in the good that might be found in the midst of all the crap, for want of a better turn of phrase.

I have found that there is a different economy
Whose currency is
Love and kindness
Faithfulness and prayer
Generosity and integrity.
When these virtues are practiced

Deposits are made and investments accrued.
So, when the world turns harsh
And desolation beckons,
I find I am rich.
And I can draw on this wealth
Providing me with
Friendship and kindness
Prayers and blessings
Fortitude and strength.

So, stay strong; stay faithful; have courage, and foster your fortitude. Remember that in the huge storm that Jonah encountered, and the several that Jesus knew on the Lake of Galilee, you are never lost, nor ever abandoned. God sees you. God is with us. “Do not be afraid” and “do not fear” are phrases repeated a great deal by Jesus in the gospels – more than seventy times, in fact. We would be wise to remember that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18), yet also remember that the reverse is also true: “perfect fear drives out love”. Our calling, as Christ’s followers is not to be fretful and fearful, but rather to become an extension of God’s courageous, endlessly expended love for this world. Our calling does not seek our own security, or indeed reward. It is to express the continual love and risk revealed in the incarnation; to become like Jesus, who is the body language of God.