

Jonah

“One way ticket to Spain, Please”. “There’s a nice voyage this afternoon to Tarshish, sir. Will that do?” “So long as it is as far as possible from Nineveh”. “It’s the other side of the world, sir. Nineveh is in Iraq. But I thought God had told you to go to Nineveh?” “That’s why I want a ticket for Spain”, said Jonah. Which is how Jonah came to be on a ship sailing for Tarshish in Spain when God had sent him on a journey to Nineveh in Iraq. And you know what happened to him on that sea journey.

Learn from Jonah about prophets. Now there’s topical for you. Never before in your lifetime has it been so important, so absolutely necessary, for you to learn about prophets. The peace of the world is very fragile at the moment; and one small contribution which Scottish Christians can make is to try to understand Islam and to understand our Muslim neighbours. Muhammad, the essential figure for approaching Islam, is always called “The Prophet”. It is a Bible word; understanding what a prophet is in the Bible helps you to enter into the world of our Muslim neighbours.

So what better way to understand what a prophet is than looking at a prophet? Enter Jonah. All the prophets had at least this in common. Somehow or other, all of the prophets in the Bible – however different they were – had this in common – they had received some special message from God. Sometimes in a vision, or in a dream, or in something that happened to them, or in a voice – but like Jonah they believed they had heard from God.

Jonah chapter 1 verse 2 *Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.* Which is exactly what he does. Eventually, after all his adventures, Jonah does get to Nineveh. And eventually, he does declare the message he has had from God. Despite his best efforts to do the opposite, despite his best efforts to escape to Tarshish, despite all his attempts to fail, he eventually declares his message from God. Which is the other mark of a prophet in the Bible. With all their differences, the prophets passed on their special message to other people. Jonah tells the people of Nineveh how it is.

It turns out to be the most spectacularly successful sermon of all time. In the history of preaching. Jonah's one attempt is Guinness Book of Records stuff. Learn from Jonah about preaching. You can't fault it for length. It only lasts one verse. *And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* However brilliant they have been, the preaching of all the preachers you have heard does not add up to a row of beans beside Jonah's sermon in terms of effectiveness. For after that brief preaching – brief and not particularly learned or imaginative or sensitive – the Bible records dramatic results. *And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

Real preaching has in mind the end which Jonah achieved. Real preaching helps people to believe in God. The surest way to dismiss anything as dull and boring is to call it a sermon: but I have no doubt that preaching is God's gift to his people, the food by which the church lives, the source of every real renewal in the story of Christianity, and the incubator of faith. Preaching - like the preaching of Jonah in Nineveh – has only one purpose; and that purpose is that the people believed God. If cleverness or learning or dogmatism or entertainment get in the way of that then they destroy preaching. But real preaching will always turn people to God. Here, Sunday by Sunday, for many years, the people of God have looked up and been fed.

Yet for Jonah the whole thing could hardly have turned out worse. He didn't want to go to Nineveh: he tried to go in the opposite direction. But storms and a great fish eventually turned him around and it was in Nineveh that he appeared. He didn't want to proclaim God's message, but out it came, from his own mouth, almost against his will. Then, worst of all, the people of Nineveh repented, and believed God! The scoundrels!

That was worst of all for Jonah, for he hated the people of Nineveh. That they should escape from the judgement of God was an outrage! Let them burn! How dare they weasel out of what they deserved by putting on sackcloth (the Bible says that their repentance was so absolute on hearing Jonah's preaching that even the animals put on sackcloth!) Jonah was so angry! For Jonah hated Nineveh. Not that he had ever met any Ninevites. Learn from Jonah about prejudice.

“Dogs bark at people whom they do not know” was the reflection of an old Greek philosopher on the prejudices he saw around him. Simple ignorance – I don’t mean lack of learning, I mean lack of knowing – lies at the heart of many of our prejudices. Of course you don’t have prejudices, you have opinions; but if you examine the prejudices of your friends you will find so often that they are prejudiced against people they do not know. Jews, blacks, women; Catholics, socialists, homosexuals. In the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we need to remember that still in our day prejudice festers under the cleanest clothes.

Jonah had never met any Ninevites. No wonder he had prejudices. What’s more, Jonah had been brought up to believe that Nineveh was a wicked place: it was part of the folk-lore of his people. The way history was taught to him, the things his religion said to him, the fear his people had for Nineveh – prejudice against the city was in his mother’s milk. That is the natural breeding ground of prejudice: *I’ve always believed it so it must be true*. It is exactly how Jonah formed his opinions about Nineveh.

But for Jonah there was no happy ending of vengeance. However it upset him, the people of Nineveh repented and God was pleased with them. Only when he would learn to see the citizens of the enemy city as God saw them would his prejudices be overcome. Only when he saw them in the purposes of God.

The ending of the book is moving. After making it clear to God that he is disgusted with the failure of God to destroy Nineveh Jonah shelters from the sun under a great bush, which shrivels and dies. Jonah becomes very irritated, and God’s response brings the book to a close:

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

It's these same animals who dressed in sackcloth after Jonah's preaching: clearly God had a soft spot for them. And more than a soft spot for Nineveh and its citizens. Learn from Jonah about providence. Prophets, preaching, prejudice: but most of all learn from Jonah about providence.

Providence is a good word as we anticipate the dedication in April of our refurbished building: when Dr Browning comes to visit as Moderator of the General Assembly. And providence is a good word as we watch the old South Morningside building passing into private hands: and so recall all the other church buildings which are part of the history of this congregation: some of them very precious still in the hearts of people here today.

Providence means the innumerable sermons that have been preached around Morningside and will be preached here, the marriages and funerals, the generations of worshippers – perhaps some very dear to you – who have loved this place and the other Morningside churches. The succession of good ministers who have done their very best, and who will do their very best, in days of encouragement and in days of discouragement. Providence means the babies – and some very far from babies – who in baptism have the water of life splashed across their faces; it means the repeated unrepeatable holiness of the Lord's Supper; it means children learning to love the Lord Jesus and old people learning to die in faith and trust.

It is not to do with protection; it is not to do with provision. Providence is to do with love. In all the bitterness which life has brought you and will bring you; in all the lovelinesses of life, I want you to remember Jonah and Nineveh and God and providence. For all their wickedness, God was very tender to the people of that great city. For Jonah that was a character flaw on the part of God. For those who have seen the face of Jesus Christ, that tenderness is the only character of God that really matters.

