

## Reflections on Jonah

We've spent four weeks as a congregation with the prophet Jonah. Here, in bullet form are some reflections.

### **Keys...**

I think there are several important keys to understanding this story and lifting it from being a 'kid's story' to a powerful part of God's word that convicts and challenges his people today.

First, we need to remember that Nineveh is in Assyria and that the Assyrians were a powerful nation that traumatized the people of Israel in extremely brutal ways. Jonah may have had friends or family members who had been killed, and whose bodies had been then used as trophies of intimidation. (Impaled on stakes, beheaded, even skinned alive)

Second, if we focus too intently on the details and the questions that occur to us like 'what kind of fish?', 'is that all Jonah said to the Ninevites?' etc, we are only dodging the power of the story. A related comment is that we need to let go of worrying whether this is "literally" true or not. Stressing over that is another way to avoid what God wants us to hear.

Third, the Bible is a 'window' to help us see who God is and what he is like. It is also a 'mirror' to help us see what we as people, or as the people of God, or personally are and are like. If we let the story be a story, Jonah is very powerful and effective. I believe it is very helpful to understand that Jonah 'is' the prophet people of God. We who are the people of God today are meant to see Jonah and consider how many of his fears, struggles and behaviours are present in us. At the end of the story we are faced with the question of how we will respond to the word of the Lord as we hear the Lord speaking here.

### **Looking through the Window**

So, what do we see and learn of God in this story?

- God calls, that is he does his work in the world through his people
- The wickedness of the world is before God's face (cf also Genesis 6, or Jesus weeping over Jerusalem)
- God is able to use his power over creation to discipline his people (cf Romans 8, that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose)
- God does not give up when his people disobey, he rescues us from our disobedience and uses our suffering and disorientation to turn our hearts to him again

-God would always rather relent and have compassion and when anyone turns from wickedness he does have compassion

-God is patient with Jonah and wants him to become compassionate too, even to his enemies

-God knows human hearts, he knows when sin and evil are done out of ignorance. Even when that wickedness is offensive to him, he has compassion for the wicked person or people

-God's compassion extends to animals

-God is the covenant God of his people, and he is also and always the Lord God of all creation and of all people in creation. He is our God, we belong to him, but he does not belong to us in the sense that he will destroy our enemies for us. Our God forgives and restores our enemies.

### **Looking in the mirror**

Remembering that 'Jonah are us'.....

-we are chosen and called to be God's messengers to speak his gracious word of warning in our world

-we are free to obey the word of the Lord or not

-our disobedience has consequences on other lives. (it can bring disaster and trouble to innocent bystanders, instead of blessing)

-we may abandon our mission because we lack confidence in the grace and strength of the Lord **or** because we have complete confidence in God as 'gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love'. We may abandon our mission because we cannot trust in God to slaughter our enemies.

-we know who to call, we know the prayers to pray, we know the songs, we know that salvation is from the Lord. In our time of trouble we know who to call and how.

-our obedience has consequences for other lives

-to live with the Lord means that we forgive and love our enemies. We either do that, or we are outside of his grace. Ie 'forgive our sins as we forgive, 'the elder son who remains outside' (see also Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 6:27-36)

-we really do need to die to ourselves if we are to live the 'God life' that God wants us to know and have

### **And what of Jesus?**

How does the story remind us of Jesus?

Jesus came willingly when he was sent.

Following Jesus and being with Jesus can mean storms too.

Jesus laid down to sleep in the bottom of a boat in a great storm

Jesus was accosted with frantic questions by the crew of his boat.

Jesus has the power to calm the storm and bring his followers safely to the other side to continue their mission.

Jesus willingly goes to the grave for three days and three nights for us. His suffering and death are life giving and life bringing in a way that the suffering of the people of God has never been.

Jesus walks out of the grave and through him, 'the word of the Lord' comes to us. He commissions us to go to all nations.

Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do". It seems to be an echo of Jonah 4:11 and suggests that while "on the one hand" as Paul says, "all men are without excuse", there is also sin and wickedness that is done out of ignorance. Some may argue that 'ignorance is no excuse', but in Jesus and in his Father ignorance seems to be a reality that triggers compassion from God.

### **How do we respond as a congregation?**

- I believe this story is a challenge to forgive our enemies and to answer God's call to bring them his word of grace
- We are called to examine our own lives and turn from any way of wickedness in us. Maybe the greatest and most invisible way of wickedness is to assume that it is all about us.
- We are certainly called to forgive whatever grievances we may have against each other.