

Today as we embark on a new series, I wanted to provide us all with an overview of the Book of Jonah so that we are positioned correctly as we read it. And so as part of my planning for this series, I've been chatting to people recently to understand what comes to mind when they think about Jonah. Because everyone knows about Jonah don't they? So let's start with a question - if I say Jonah what comes to mind?

It's definitely the whale isn't it. When I asked my son Josh about the story of Jonah, he mentioned the cartoon Veggie Tales which I had completely forgotten that we taught him as a child (explain veggie tales). The whale seems to be the big focus as we consider Jonah. And so isn't it amazing what sticks in your mind and what doesn't. But this can be the challenge and the problem I think, where the familiar stories that stick in our minds are set in place from childhood, but I'm guessing that many people don't then take the time to read the actual scriptures in detail to understand more. Therefore the stories become slightly diluted, and don't really provoke us to understand what God is saying in it. So for example, with the story of Jonah many will walk away thinking more about whether being swallowed by a whale and being spat out several days later intact, could in fact ever be true. And so many doubt, treat it as a fictitious story, but we never resolve in our minds that if it's in the bible it must be true.

You see the problem with the whale thing is that this isn't the focus of the book. The word fish or whale is only mentioned 4 times in the whole book. Yes it's good for the Sunday school story, but there is a deeper story going on if we were to only read all 48 verses. I ask each of you to take the time and read these verses as we journey through this book – it will take you 10 minutes. And as you sit on those verses you will find that the story is not just about the character of Jonah, but it's more about the character of God, and for each of us it highlights the pride, the judgementalism, and the inability to grow and change and see God's grace working in our frailty to bring about incredible things if we would only trust him.

So let's read these 3 verses this morning with open eyes and ears, to hear afresh what God is wanting to say to us today.

Verse 1, 'The Word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai.' Let's stop here and examine this for a bit. These series of books are books of the prophets. What were prophets? – prophets were people who would speak on God's behalf to a nation. And so the word of the Lord speaks to the prophets. That's the words at the beginning of Jonah. And it's also how the book of Hosea starts, or the book of Joel, or Micah. But in every book, apart from Jonah, we then get the words that the prophet declares over the people. For example, the first verses of Joel says, 'The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel. Hear this you elders; listen all you who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors?' The prophet Joel is prophesying over the people.

This doesn't happen with the book of Jonah. Instead we get a story about what happens to him. Apart from 8 words in chapter 3 verse 4, Jonah doesn't declare anything over the people. So it's quite a unique style of book and one which we can learn so much from.

So let's move on a bit further - "The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai." I've preached before about there being so much in people's names and their meanings. Well the name Jonah means dove, and Son of Amittai means son of faithfulness. So this gives us some insight into the style of writing of this book. It begins that the word of the Lord comes to someone named as a dove, who is the son of faithfulness. It's rather funny that we know

from the story that Jonah like a dove is certainly flying, but he's flying in the opposite direction. It's not a path of faithfulness, it's running away. So the opening phrase of this book couldn't be any more ironic.

Our first reading from 2 Kings 14 also will give us a sense of Jonah's context and timing. So here's the background. Jeroboam II whose reign began in 786BC was the son of Jehoash and he's not a nice person. He's named after Jeroboam I, who was the king who led the northern tribes to split, essentially starting a civil war. Jeroboam actually built two alternate temples as a rival to the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, and he put golden calves in them. That's Jeroboam, and now Jeroboam II made things even worse. And into this Jonah prophesied favourably towards this king. Unlike the prophets Amos and Hosea, who criticized the royal administration for its injustice and unfaithfulness, Jonah had supported Jeroboam's military policy to extend the nation's power and influence. This gives us a perspective into Jonah's nature as a prophet.

So Jonah receives the word of the Lord, and is called to go to the great city of Ninevah. Ninevah was indeed great. It was the capital city for the Assyrians, and Assyria was the empire that came and wiped out ten of the tribes of Israel; wiped them right off the map. The Assyrians were the most brutal, oppressive, and violent of the ancient empires. Their general practice was to plunder a city, and skin alive all of the leaders of the city in front of everybody before they deported them back to Assyria. So as God calls Jonah to speak against the city and all of its wickedness you probably now can get an idea of the scale of evil we are talking about. We will see in Chapter 3 that God is giving them an ultimatum after which the Ninevites will be overthrown.

So Jonah runs away from the Lord. What an interesting phrase. This is the Lord of the Universe and yet Jonah thinks he can escape from him. Its impossible. I'm reminded of Psalm 139:7 'Where can I flee from your presence? <sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. <sup>9</sup> If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, <sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast'. We have complete clarity that if Jonah was trying to flee from God, he was on a hiding to nothing. And here's how far he was willing to go. I'm going to show you a map, just to give you an idea of where these locations actually are. God is calling him to go to somewhere 550 miles away, and so what does Jonah do? he flees to somewhere 5 times that distance in the opposite direction, some 2,500 miles away. In fact in the known ancient world he couldn't have travelled any further. He was heading to the edge of the Mediterranean, almost at the tip of Gibraltar.

But let's not think in any way that we would be different. Because let's just look today at where Ninevah is. The modern name for Ninevah is Mosul in Iraq. Mosul held deep symbolic importance for the Islamic State group. They overran Mosul in June of 2014 and declared a caliphate stretching from territory in northern Syria deep into Iraq's north and west areas. And it was from Mosul's al-Nuri mosque that the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, made his only public appearance when he gave a Friday sermon calling on all Muslims to follow him as "caliph." He vowed that the Islamic State would conquer "Rome," and the entire world. Now can you imagine God calling on you today and saying, "Go to the great city of Mosul and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me". What would you and I do? Would you immediately say to God, "right point me in the direction and I'm getting on my bike to get there immediately." Somehow I think not. Like Jonah you would be fleeing as far away as is physically possible.

So Jonah is bound to be frightened about the call. But that's not actually why he won't go and we find out more about his character when we reach Chapter 4. By this stage he has preached an 8 word sermon, and as result the scriptures say that everyone turned to God – not some, but everyone. However instead of rejoicing at what God had done through his obedience, verse 1 of Chapter 4 says that this was wrong in Jonah's eyes and he became very angry.

And so we see the real reason why he won't go to Ninevah. He knows God so well. He knows that somehow, God would find a way to bring His grace, and His mercy to these people through their repentance. He just knew that somehow this was going to have a happy ending. But he doesn't want a happy ending for his enemies. Jonah never wants to see this plan of God worked out. He doesn't deny what God is capable of. No, in fact the opposite, because he knows that God's plans always succeed – he just doesn't want to be involved in them. Is it because he's frightened for his own life, or is it really that he hates this nation so much that he doesn't believe they deserve another chance. He says to God, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.<sup>3</sup> Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." Jonah doesn't want to be labelled as the person who through God's grace and mercy brings about incredible spiritual transformation. Instead he wants his life to end rather than face the reality of these his enemies now forgiven and loving him.

Jonah is not willing to see God's bigger plan. Jonah is being invited to step into a story that is much broader, that's more risky, it's way bigger than anything he ever signed up for. Jonah has a vision of what his life is about and he's limited it to what works for him and what doesn't. You see folks this is where Godly obedience kicks in for all of us. God has a plan for each one of us, as to how we partner within him in his mission to rescue lost souls, but we have a competing vision of what our lives are all about. That's how we operate. And so we often pursue after it rather than acknowledge what God has planned. We have a competing vision, but you see Jesus comes along and says "Follow me." In your mind there's a whole bunch of things that you're doing that you think is life but actually it's not true life at all. It's competing visions of life, and when God calls His people, the first thing that we're confronted with is this - am I going to settle for the path of life that I'm on and what I call life, or am I going to entertain this new invitation to follow the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

You know it's very easy to train our minds into a pattern each and every week in which Church plays an important part in the weekly rhythm but that's all. And into this Jesus comes and calls us to follow him, to grow in him, to disrupt our daily pattern. And our response is to either ignore and keep doing what we always do, or we try to escape – maybe going AWOL for a few weeks until things calm down again.

You see folks, when we come to Jesus, there's a death that has to take place. And it's a death to our vision of the good life, our vision of what we think our life is about. You see when we talk about Good News, we are not talking about the next job opportunity, or that everything is in place for your pension or investments. No the good news is that only in Jesus do we receive abundant life. An abundant life in Jesus, knowing God's will for my life is so rooted in His love for me, so much so that I realise that all his wishes are good things for me, and that when He tells me to stop, and turn around, and come His way, He only has my best in mind. The question is are we willing to listen and respond, or are we like Jonah on the ship heading in the opposite direction, below deck, fast asleep hoping to remain hidden from God?

This morning one of the announcements or invitations that we are making is for people whether young or old to consider exploring what in Church call Confirmation – but a better term for it is ‘Exploring Faith’. And I know that many people were confirmed at an earlier age, but I wonder for how many people was your Confirmation a life changing moment in surrendering your life – all the things you hold precious – your family, your children, their futures, your future, your health, your wealth, your happiness – and giving it all over to God, or was Confirmation something that you did because your parents made you and in some way that’s the golden ticket for heaven. You see becoming a Christian involves letting my vision of what my life is about and letting it die. It’s the fact that I’m now a co-worker in the Mission of Jesus who’s at work in the world and who invites me to become a part of it. And so, could it be that your vision of what your life is all about is just too small, and Jesus is inviting you to something different. I’d encourage you this morning that if you’d like to explore the Christian faith fully, then get in touch with me.

For those of us who are here, the majority of us, I’m guessing we’d self-identify as Christians. But even with that identity, for some of us, we might have patterns in life that don’t actually reflect a Christian lifestyle - patterns of behaviour that we need to stop, patterns of thinking of ways of acting, and they don’t lead to life, and we know it, and we’re scared to let go of that because that’s what we know. That’s the only life we know. The reality of following Jesus will involve letting those worldly patterns die, and I can assure you that a life where Jesus truly becomes the centre will be transformative. It’s the choice you have. For some of us, it might not be stopping behaviours, it might be starting new behaviours that will invite us into true life. For example, at present within the parish we have 7 small groups meeting regularly to study God’s Word together. That’s about 40 people. Now out of around 500 people in the parish, not including young people, that’s around 8% of adults attending small groups. Our weekly prayer gathering accounts for about 15 people so that’s 3% of adults coming together to pray. The only way that we grow as a church body is if we regularly study God’s word and pray. Folks, is that something as a new behaviour that you can begin to consider adopting as we move out of COVID?

Like Jonah, there’s things that God wants us to walk into in obedience, but for some of us the only option is to get on a metaphorical boat and get as far away as possible, or hide until things calm down. Maybe we have got ourselves into a pattern with work or with home that makes it extremely difficult to carve out the time needed, maybe COVID has got us into a pattern where faith has been pushed down the priority somewhat. None of this is easy, I struggle with it, but God wants all of us to turn around and walk in obedience.

So as we begin to open the pages of Jonah in these weeks ahead, here’s a few things I want to leave you with and ask you to prayerfully consider :

Find time in your daily routine, make time so you can hear the Word of God coming to you, so that you may hear his calling on your life. Consider in prayer what he is asking you to do in your life.

Next, recognise that you may need to stop the boat and turn around. The good news about this scary thought is that God doesn’t condemn our disobedience. Psalm 145 reminds us that *‘The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works’*.

For some of us you know there is something in your life that you need to let it die at the cross of Jesus, and let Jesus speak into your life afresh without that burden that has occupied your time and your vision. Maybe like Jonah, you need to be shown by God the prejudices within your heart that need to be brought in repentance before him. Maybe today you need to go to someone and say you're sorry.

And then finally, as we open the pages of Jonah in the weeks ahead, pray that God will reveal to you how even in a place of disobedience or anxiety about where he wants to lead you, that you will see his mercy patiently directing you back to him, and his grace which loves us with all our brokenness, but amazingly like Jonah still has a plan for how you can collaborate in his mission.

May the Lord bless his Word in the weeks ahead, and may we have ears that hear him speak into our lives. Amen.