

## JONAH 3:1-10

A teacher of biology was talking about whales. Someone asked, 'Can whales swallow people?'

The teacher said, 'No, they cannot.'

A little girl in the class said, 'What about Jonah?'

The teacher explained that the story of Jonah was just that - only a story, and that whales cannot swallow people.

The child said, 'When I get to heaven I'm going to ask Jonah if he was swallowed by a whale.'

The teacher, unwisely, said, 'But what if Jonah didn't go to heaven?'

The little girl responded, 'Then you can ask him.'

No doubt over the years, you've heard different views on the story of Jonah. There are those who are convinced that there was a historic person called Jonah, a real city called Nineveh, and Jonah was in reality swallowed by a big fish (the story doesn't actually name the fish as a whale). And then there are those who believe this book is a story.

Many Old Testament scholars these days see the book of Jonah as an Old Testament parable. However, it really doesn't matter whether you believe Jonah is history or parable, what does matter is what it has to say to us.

This story was told in Israel after the return of God's people from exile. Once the exile was over, the Israelites had to establish themselves again as a nation, in the face of many difficulties.

Two different points of view came into being. One view was that security was important and therefore it was advisable to have nothing whatsoever to do with non-Jews. The other view was a wider one which recognised that Israel was a 'kingdom of priests,' called to share their faith with the nations around them.

The story of Jonah was told to repudiate the view of those who wanted to separate themselves from non-Jews.

We didn't read the whole story this morning, but no doubt you know it. God called Jonah to preach against the wicked city of Nineveh, but Jonah hated the Ninevites so much that he refused to obey God's call. He ran off in the opposite direction, and it took a huge storm, being thrown overboard and being swallowed by a big fish for Jonah to finally capitulate and do what God told him to.

But even when Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh, he still wasn't all that enthusiastic. We see this in the way he delivered the message. It was brief, aggressive and offered no hope. "Forty days and you shall be overthrown!" bellowed Jonah, and he stalked out of there. Then when the Ninevites repented and God *forgave* them rather than

smiting them, Jonah went off and sulked. He was actually really peeved that the Ninevites had repented and been spared.

Jonah's attitude towards the city of Nineveh was a picture of the attitude of the Jews of the day towards the non-Jewish nations around them.

So what is this story teaching? Much like the parables of Jesus, the book of Jonah has a central point. Of course there are other lessons we can glean from it, and in fact Jesus even used the story as a metaphor of his own death and resurrection. But it's the main point I want to look at this morning.

We find that point in the last few verses of the book.

Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.

But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

The whole point of the story of Jonah is that God is Lord of all the nations, not just the Jews, and that his grace extends to all. And of course, inherent in that message, given the cultural context in which it was told, is the reminder to the Jews of their responsibility to take God's message of grace too EVERYONE – not just enjoy it amongst their own kith and kin.

The story obviously had a great deal of meaning for the Jews of the day, but does it have anything to say to us?

I'm sure we'd all like to say, "It's not a story for us! We're Christians. We extend God's grace and love people impartially and unconditionally, the way Jesus did."

But sadly, it hasn't been like that in practice. Human history is full of something we might call the 'Jonah Syndrome' – that tendency humanity has to 'stick to their own kind' - just like Jonah - often evidencing hostility and discrimination towards those whom they consider different or inferior.

Remember when the United States of America elected its first black president? All the political commentators were astounded. The event was hailed as the most significant event

in American political history. The reason? Embedded deeply in America's history has been the belief that African Americans are inferior to whites. When there was a move to abolish slavery, they fought a civil war over it. The churches in the South were just as much in support of slavery as the rest of their culture.

In South Africa, there was Apartheid. The separating of two cultures. I was born in South Africa, and I was stunned at one time, to hear my father express his support of Apartheid. He believed black Africans were inferior to whites and shouldn't be allowed to mix with them.

When Jay and I got married, Jay's best man was an ebony black Ugandan called Titus, a friend from Ridley College. One of my bridesmaids was a South African cousin who had also immigrated to Australia with her family. We caused some fireworks when we inadvertently partnered Titus, the Ugandan, with my South African cousin in the wedding party. What a drama! We actually had to change the partners around because of my South African family's prejudices! It's never easy for the Church to oppose the culture of which it is a part, and unfortunately, in South Africa, the churches were as much a part of Apartheid in the early days as the rest of the country.

We sometimes put the church on a pedestal and assume it is above this sort of thing, but it's never easy for the Church to oppose the culture of which it is a part, and unfortunately, in South Africa, as in the Deep South of America, the churches were as much a part of the discrimination as the rest of the culture.

Thankfully, the Church is learning. We are less inclined now to discriminate against people because of the colour of their skin. However, I don't think we are totally immune from the 'Jonah Syndrome.'

It may not be as overt as racial or religious prejudice, but we all still have a tendency to 'stick to our own kind' and avoid being involved with others who are not part of our social or church circle. It is human nature to avoid those whom we find odd, or difficult or distasteful.

Our Gospel reading this morning from Mark is the account of Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him. What was his promise? It was that they would no longer catch fish – they would catch people for God. At the very heart of the Good News is Jesus' desire that his people share the grace of God with others. That was the commission of the first disciples, and it has been the commission of his followers ever since.

How are we doing with that commission? Is the opportunity to share our faith with others something we are alert to? Or are we more like Jonah, in that we really would rather not share the message? Don't get me wrong, I don't think our motivation is the same as Jonah's – I'm sure we don't want to see unbelievers fry – but I suspect we do share his desire to avoid the commission.

We might object and say, ‘but I’m no prophet! I can’t articulate this Gospel stuff.’ But bear in mind that Jonah wasn’t all that articulate either! In this story, he only uttered one brief, begrudging sentence, and God took it, anointed it, and caused it to bring a nation to repentance.

God simply asks us to witness to what we know. It may be a simple comment in a conversation - “you know, it might help to pray about that. God loves you, you know.” Or a statement giving God glory for something – “Hasn’t God given us a beautiful morning” or “Thank God for the rain he’s sent.”

There could be any number of short, simple affirmations of God’s love for another person. It’s not our job to bring about repentance – that’s God’s job. Our job is simply to be willing to take whatever opportunities come our way to put in a good word for God. He’ll do the rest.

The point of the story of Jonah is that God is Lord of all, and he wants to extend his love and grace to everyone – even the most unlikely of people – and within that desire you and I, like Jonah, and like Simon and his crew, are called to take God’s message of Grace to them.

The promise of the story of Jonah is that God will take our efforts and bless them, and bring about his purposes as we make ourselves available to him..

Let’s pray.