

## Jonah and Israel

Swimming is good for you. Especially if you're drowning. Not only do you get a good cardiovascular workout, but you also avoid death!

Well, not for Jonah. Jonah and the Whale. We all know the story. Except it wasn't a whale was it, it was a fish. But it was a fish so big, that it swallowed a human being, who sat for three days, patiently resisting the acids of the whale's digestive system. Until, after three days, the fish approaches dry land and vomits out its submarine passenger. Right. There is the story. And of course, we all know don't we – that the bible is God's word, and because the Bible is God's Word it is true, and because it is true, then this must refer to an actual, physical, historical event that took place.

So ... incredible though it may seem, if you are a good bible-believing Christian, then you have to accept that this man Jonah spent three days inside the stomach of a fish. And if you are a good bible believing preacher, then you will go out of your way to prove that this can actually happen. And so, in the last century, several true-life accounts of people being swallowed by whales and surviving were discovered and celebrated in conservative evangelical churches, and commentaries on Jonah report some of these stories. Men, being swallowed by a fish, and being vomited out with their skin bleached, and suffering all manner of mental disorder. So there you go – in a world where there is fierce debate about the historical credibility of the Bible, the conservatives could find their proof that even a story as ridiculous as that of Jonah, can be proven as physically possible.

Mmmmm. That's interesting. But this way of dealing with the bible has ended up leading Christians away from what is actually happening in this text. In the last century, we inherited a pretty mechanical, two dimensional way of interpreting the real world and a flat, two dimensional interpretation of the bible. Because the Bible is God's word, it is therefore true, and because it is true, then we have to interpret everything in the same way.

Now that, is as unbiblical a way of engaging with Scripture as it is possible to find. Thinking that the whole of the bible is just one book, to be read in one way, saying one thing. And we forget, that the bible is written by a whole range of people, over the course of at least a thousand years, and is made up of all sorts of different genres, all manner of different types of literature. And one of the most basic lessons in listening to people, is listening to the way that they are speaking to you. One of the most basic lessons in understanding a text, is first of all understanding what kind of a text it is.

So to read the entire bible, with all its languages, dialects, traditions, nationalities, customs, times and places – to read the entire collection of literature that collectively constitutes Holy Scripture, to read the entire bible as though it were a two dimensional scientific description of stuff that happened – is alien to the bible itself. There has to be something utterly dysfunctional about you, if that is how you relate to a person or a text.

This has been one of the major difficulties surrounding the debate about creation-v-evolution. People on both sides of the argument, have come to the Bible and treated the accounts in Genesis as though they were a paper being published in Science Today! When to anyone who takes the trouble to look properly at the text cannot conclude that the Genesis account is anything other than poetry. That does not mean that it is not true. It means that in order to grasp the truth that is being communicated, you have to enter into the poetic world that is

being painted for you and to let it have its effect upon you. And what the Genesis text then says is not, yes – in your 19<sup>th</sup> century debates about science, you can be assured of your belief in God. The text then says – look, your life is falling apart – but there is a God who is before and after and bigger than the horrific circumstances you are currently facing. Understanding a text, means understanding the kind of literature it is – and that is really, very very basic.

So, when we come to a text like Jonah, what do we do? If we come to it and say “it is impossible for a fish to swallow a man and three days later to spit him out”, therefore this is a primitive text for primitive or uneducated people – we have failed to hear it. Equally, if we come to the text and say – “ah, this did happen historically, and that is what is important” – again, we have missed the point.

This entire book is a parable! It is the story of Israel compressed into one man! If you read this book as a grown up, that is the only conclusion you can reach. And when you begin to enter into the text in this way – it becomes a highly disturbing and disruptive text. Jonah is Israel. He is a picture of the history of Israel. This book is the entire story of the Old Testament compressed into four chapters. The entire history of the people of God up until the time that this text is written, is to be found in the words of this prophet, written not long before the birth of Christ.

And let’s be clear – again, if you take the trouble to learn Hebrew, you see how the language develops over time and the pictures that are used. And you can see which period of history it comes from. If you discovered a Shakespeare play, then you might be able to argue that it was written last week by someone who had studied 16<sup>th</sup> century language and history. But you could not claim that a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Shakespeare text, was written in the twelfth century – because the language and rhythm and imagery and reference is entirely different. The text of Jonah – if you take the trouble to study it well – is a text from only a couple of centuries before Christ.

And it is telling the story of Israel. So – what is the story of Israel. Israel is born out of conflict. It has its origins in a boxing match held at a venue called, Penuel. In the red corner was an unknown contender – unsure whether it was a man, an angel, or God himself. In the blue corner, was a man called Jacob. And Jacob fought with his opponent throughout the night – and was forever wounded by the experience. He wanted God’s blessing, but he had to fight for it. Jacob became Israel as a result of that fight. And he became a great nation – a nation whose purpose was to be a light to the nations.

Israel has been divinely commissioned to embody Yahweh, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. And yet we know from the Old Testament that time after time, Israel failed. Israel failed to be a light to the nations, failed to bring the good news about God’s lovingkindness to the world. Israel too easily regarded itself as God’s favourite, and didn’t want the rest of the world to share the blessing that she as a nation enjoyed.

And there you have it: Jonah’s reluctance to go and share the good news. Why throw your pearls before swine? Those nasty people over there, are nasty people over there! And WE don’t like THEM! Now, you can see this in the way that children behave. But you can see it also in the way that adults behave with one another in church. Think, in our own church for instance, of the enormous fears often voiced, that anything different we do – that is not in tune with what we want in worship – is to be associated with THOSE half-brained, happy-clappy, charismatic-half wits. OUR worship is more sophisticated than THEIRS. Of course, if we

really are sophisticated, then we will not be that crude in our voicing our fears. We disguise our prejudices and ignorance behind other concerns. It's the same attitude as old Israel, of early Jonah! *We* will not have anything to do with *them*.

And what happens to Israel is precisely what happens to Jonah. She is led away into exile. 70 years in Babylon! 70 years in Ninevah – the capital of Babylon. A forced migration – until Israel has learned her lesson – and is eventually vomited out back into the promised land, seventy years later. The Exile. Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish is Israel's 70 years in exile. This is not just some clever association dreamt up by later historians. This is the reality that the text of Jonah draws us to recognise.

But having been in exile, has Israel learned her lesson when she returns to be a light to the nations? Having been in the belly of the fish, has Jonah learned his lesson? Well, in some sense yes. Israel experienced something of a revival – which we read of in books like Nehemiah and Ezra – about the rebuilding of Israel after the exile. Yes, in some sense, Jonah has learned his lesson. Because he goes to the Ninevites, and he calls these nasty Babylonian foreigners to repent.

And then, for Jonah, disaster strikes. Disaster! What happens – after he has called the Ninevites to repent? What could be the world thing that could possibly happen? They repent! Hold on a minute. Jonah was all keyed up for divine retribution on the enemies of God. Jonah is looking forward to a lot of burning, and torment and gnashing of teeth. And he is robbed of this satisfying spectacle, because horror of horrors – the Ninevites repent. God relents. His anger is averted! And what does Jonah do? He sulks! He had been looking forward to a good burning – only to discover, at the last minute – that the show is cancelled!

That is precisely what we see in Israel. She experiences the great miracle of deliverance. She returns from exile, the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt. The nation is re-established. It is a glorious period of history, when you might have expected a humbled nation to have learned humility. But no. An attitude that remains prominent in Israel, and is one that Jesus himself confronts, is this belief that *We* – *We* are God's People – and they, those nasty horrible foreign dogs – have no claim upon the grace of God! And this is precisely the attitude Jesus attacks when he says to the religious leaders – “people will come from foreign nations – people will come from North, South, East and West and take their place at the great banquet of the Kingdom of God, while you yourself are left outside where there will be great Whaling and gnashing of teeth.” (Other examples).

The story of Jonah ends with him having his sulk with God, and God having to explain to this blood-thirsty prophet of doom, that it is not God's will to bless Israel and crush everyone else. This – quite clearly is a lesson that many in Israel needed to learn in Jesus' day, and obviously is a lesson that many in Israel need to learn today.

It's a bit tricky for us to try and learn something from this text. Because we all know that we need to be open and inclusive and ready to bless others and not to curse them. We can stop and think – who are our Ninevites today ... who are we tempted to hate ... ? But really -

