

Jonah and Resurrection!

The parallels are quite obvious when you think about it. Jonah spends three days in the belly of a fish, where he should have died, just as Jesus spent three days in the tomb. In fact, the sea itself is a major metaphor for death in ancient near eastern cultures. The sea is wild, uncontrollable, and would devour its victim without warning. But just as there was something about Jesus that defied the digestion system of death, so there is something about Jonah that defies the digestive system of the fish. It is God's command! And Jonah is vomited out onto dry land, just as Jesus is vomited back into the world of the living.

And I suppose the question is then, what is it that has changed between the pre and post death experiences of Jesus, and of Jonah! Well, here I am building a little on what we said last week on how we might interpret this book. That Jonah is a metaphor for Israel. That Israel is called for a purpose, and commissioned with a message for the world. But seems to resent God's mercy and acts mercilessly towards her neighbours. So – just as Jonah is sent into the belly of the fish – so Israel is sent off to Exile in Babylon! Game over! Settle down, says the prophet Jeremiah, you're here for the long haul!

And yet – after 70 years in exile, Israel is sent back to the promised land. The nation is rebuilt, the temple is rebuilt, the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt, and the people are recommissioned to be what they should have been all along – a light to the nations. But did Israel learn her lesson? We know from the later Old testament that still, there was a tendency for Israel to adopt the role of the Judge of the nations, rather than the light. What was the difference then, between Israel before the Exile and Israel after the Exile? Was there a difference? What was the difference between Jonah before the fish and after the fish! His spirit of judgement seems to remain intact? What has Israel learned, what has Jonah learned. What, in reality, is different about this new life?

I suppose the power of this resurrection has to be made real, has to become a reality in the life of Israel: in the life of a believer. And what does that mean. What does it mean to believe in the resurrection. Are we saying nothing more than – “yes, I give my academic assent to the fact that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead – because we all know that was impossible, but God did it anyway – so three cheers for God and three cheers for Jesus.” But really – why is resurrection necessary to the Gospel story? If it is all about Jesus dying for our sins... why do we need resurrection!

If we want to hold on to the belief that we get teleported off to some heavenly realm after we die, then why is the resurrection necessary for that. Jesus died for our sins, took the punishment we deserve, became sin on our behalf – and died... Why do we need the resurrection! Is it just so that Jesus could come back and let us all know that – it's okay – Jesus won the battle, so you can be assured that your belief system is now fully functional? Really, when you stop and think about it... why on earth is the resurrection necessary for our faith. If Jesus had not been risen from the dead, then WHY, as Paul claims, would our faith be useless. Really?

Perhaps the question is not whether we have been Baptised – like Jonah was baptised into new life, like Israel had been baptised through her exile and into new life. The question is not whether we can say ‘three cheers for the resurrection’. The question is rather whether this resurrection is rooted in our lives here and now. That takes far more than simply saying – yes, I believe God performed a conjuring trick with bones in some Palestinian hills two

thousand years ago. The question is whether our way of being is shaped by this resurrection. And how might that look? On a daily basis, what does it mean for the resurrection to be the root of your existence?

I wonder whether, in some ways, it might simply mean being present in a conversation. I have to confess that I do not always feel very good at that. It seems that there is a lot of conversation around here: we are in Bloomsbury after all – the home of the chattering classes. And there are plenty in our church who are not short of a word or two, and have quite strong opinions on a variety of issues. That can only be a good thing! So what does it mean for us to be present in a conversation? And by being present in a conversation, I don't mean simply being interested to what another person says, nor being able to listen well and ask good questions. I don't mean curiosity and being able to look another person in the eye. Being present in a conversation means a little more than that. Perhaps it means presenting yourself to another person in conversation.

It means presenting yourself in such a way, that what other people say washes around and through you like a wild, dangerous ocean. Remembering, of course, that an ocean is a metaphor for death. Allowing something of yourself to be genuinely exposed to others in conversation, entails death. It can mean that precious thoughts, valued opinions, assumptions, judgements, convictions – all of them are exposed. And it takes enormous courage to do this. And it is a courage that we claim to have when we dare to say “I believe in the resurrection!” Because, when we are genuinely present in a conversation, then the person that we are is up for grabs – a little death – that leads to us being reconstituted, reshaped – resurrected. When this becomes true in our lives – then you can be sure that resurrection is at work.

It is much easier to enter a conversation like Jonah entered the belly of the fish. Yes, he came out and made an effort to be obedient – which, I'm pretty sure, is simply a Latin word for listening! But really, he was still convinced that he was right – and those Ninevites were wrong – and that God should not bless them! Those nasty people over there! Instead of being present in a conversation – it is much easier to enter it with the simple goal that your view is the right one, and that you just need to get other people to see that you are right – and they are wrong! That – is precisely the story of Jonah, of Israel, and of millions of Christians around the world who claim to believe in the Resurrection, but whose basic ways of relating tell a different story!

The challenge of the resurrection of Christ, for us today, is not really to perform the mental gymnastical feats necessary to make yourself believe that God can do the impossible. It is, rather, in allowing God to do the impossible in you. It is in allowing the word of God to wash through us – the voice of Christ to penetrate who we are – swirling around us like a wild and dangerous ocean. And this is why resurrection is hard for us to swallow! Because our default position is that of Jonah, that of Israel, that which has always plagued the people of God!

Do we dare to believe in the resurrection? Do we dare to have our minds and our lives changed by encountering another person. Do we dare to be present in conversation? Everything in our culture makes a virtue out of openness, and a sin out of intransigence. But all our culture has taught us to do is to hide our intransigence, our refusal to listen, our fear being present in conversation. We hide our refusal to be present in conversation beneath a thin veneer of expressive gestures, of fake wisdom, of unreflective soundbites! Because believing in the resurrection is tough, and hard, and it hurts, and it involves death. And exposing yourself in conversation is nothing less than death. But in the end, Jonah, Israel,

Christ, and us – are lifted up by this wild and wasteful ocean of grace – lifted up, to hear the Word of God, to experience the resurrection of Christ, to receive as a foretaste of what is to come.