

Wot? No Whale?

1: An Introduction to the Book of Jonah. Jonah 1: 1-3

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ² ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ ³ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Who is Jonah?

Mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, where God speaks through “his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.”

What’s in a name? Jonah’s name means “dove” - In the story of Noah and the flood, the dove is a sign of peace. The one who is sent to cry out against the evil city of Nineveh is a *dove*? “Dove” is a term of endearment in the Song of Solomon. A panicky, sulky, angry, spiky person is one to whom God speaks in loving, longing terms?

What about your name? Take a moment imagining God calling you by name. You are special. You are loved.

What kind of book is this?

One of a group of twelve prophetic books written between the 8th and 5th Centuries, BC. Jonah was probably written in the 4th century BC.

It differs from the others because rather than being a book written *by* Jonah, it’s written *about* him, as a third person narrative.

It is read in the synagogue on the afternoon of the festival of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It’s a time to remember God’s love and mercy, and to examine oneself. (And that sounds a bit like what we are doing during Lent, as we anticipate that great atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross)

What is a Prophet?



Prophets as interpreters - people who tell us “how it is”. A prophet of God wants to stir his or her audience to a response: a renewed vision, a change of heart, a different kind of behaviour.

Who tells us our “home truths”?

Take some time to consider those people who speak to us and “tell it how it is”. Give thanks for them.

Ask God for insight this Lent.

Why did Jonah run away?

God tells Jonah to head east to Nineveh, and Jonah runs away as far west as he can go to Tarshish.

Nineveh and Tarshish as symbolic places. **Nineveh:** the place where civilization first gathered to create a city after God had made his covenant not to flood the Earth again, now turned into a byword for overweening power, wickedness and evil. Would you really want to go there and call them out?

Tarshish: Anywhere far, far away over the sea, because there was an idea in Hebrew thinking that prophecy does not come to sea travellers. Jonah wanted to put not only miles between him and the city at the centre of God’s attention, but also put himself where he thought was beyond God’s reach. Imagine, if you will, the child who hides her face with her hands and then tells you that “you can’t see me.”

There is a Sufi story about a great teacher whose twelve students wanted to learn his mystical wisdom. “Very well,” said the teacher, and gave each one of them a dove. “Go somewhere where no one can see you, and kill it, and when you come back, I will teach you what you want to know.”

Eleven of his students came back with dead birds, and he sent them away. One returned with the dove still alive. “I couldn’t find anywhere,” he said, “where no One could see me.” It was to that student, who understood God’s omnipresence, that the teacher chose to transmit his blessing and his wisdom.

But our Jonah, our dove, our prophet, forgets that. He flies from his calling, flees from God.

Where and to whom am I being called?

Am I running away from something? What are the conversations which I’d rather not have, or the action I would like to avoid making?