

Wot? No Whale?

2: Jonah and the Sailors - The First Conversion

Jonah 1:4-17

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶ The captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.'

⁷ The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, 'Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' ⁹ 'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' ¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

¹¹ Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.' ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the LORD, 'Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.' ¹⁵ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

¹⁷ But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Our dove, Jonah, has tried to fly away from God and his command to speak to the people of Nineveh by getting on a boat bound for Tarshish, as far away as he can possibly get.

These are human terms; our human sense of distance, our human sense of timing, our human sense of God and what he thinks. One of the things we learn from the book of Jonah is that both Jonah's, and our understanding of God's perspective is highly skewed.

We are all at sea tonight. Jonah has thrown his lot in with the pagan sailors; tough men, working a living on the passages of the sea. Jonah thought that he would be safe here; travelling incognito amongst people who did not share his faith. People who take his money for the trip to Tarshish without asking awkward questions. People who do not seem to be making any demands on him; he can be anonymous, hide away from his true identity, a piece of baggage in the hold, tucked away where no-one will see or worry about him.

Can you think of any times where you might try to 'go incognito' as a Christian? Do we hide away in the holds of our social groups, our work colleagues, where and how we choose to shop, even in church groups?

It's worth noticing that our reading begins by describing the sea as being "hurled" by God. It's a violent creation. Why would a loving God create something which threatens the lives of so many souls?

Just in case you haven't noticed, everything in this story seems to happen on a grand scale. A great wind, a mighty storm..a large fish. God is shouting through his creation, "Look at me! Listen to me!"

The sailors understand something of the supernatural nature of what they are experiencing immediately. Their first response is for each to call upon his god. There is something sad about this; they each have a form of spiritual awareness, whether borne out of respect for the elements or a more organised sense of religion, but their prayers are diffuse, panicky cries which only serve to show how alone they are.

Not only do they show their terror through their desperate prayers, but also in the way that they bring financial ruin upon themselves by throwing all their precious cargo overboard. They busy themselves both spiritually and physically as they unburden themselves in a desperate effort to avoid a watery doom.

By contrast, Jonah is completely inert. The captain himself comes upon him and challenges him to action: what is he doing fast asleep at such a time? And even if he can't help lift and carry, surely, he can say a prayer or two to whatever god it is that he worships? The phrase "Perhaps the god will spare us a thought" makes me think of people who call out, "Say one for me!" as they see me on my way to church.

Jonah is in a place of deep denial. Even his sleep seems to be an action of stubborn defiance. Yet, once woken up, he has to own up to who he is. His true identity is forced out of him. Casting lots only serves to point the finger at him inescapably. Who and what is this being which the sailors have taken on board? They show remarkable restraint in not running him through and throwing him overboard straight away.

Yet Jonah's explanation of his identity is hugely ironic. He explains that he is a Hebrew - not a Jew. He is linking himself to Abraham, the great father of the Jewish nation. He describes his God as being the creator of sea and land, but whilst the sailors are terrified and awestruck by this description, there is little sense of him showing much awe at what his God can do. He says he worships the Lord, but running in the opposite direction from the one which the Lord has told him to take is hardly the outcome you would expect from true worship. This Lord - Elohim - is different from the many gods to whom the sailors prayed, and they are deeply affected by this.

What does our worship mean to us? Is the way we lead our lives made different because of our worship?

The sailors are stuck in a double bind. As the sea rises to even greater fury, Jonah tells them to throw him overboard. He confesses that the storm is down to him and his disobedience. But does he say that he's sorry? Is his speech to the sailors an act of repentance, self-sacrifice or self-pity? He is tellingly silent on that detail.

The sailors recognise that they must do something to appease God, but they do everything they can to avoid taking Jonah's life. They try to use their physical strength to row back to shore, but all to no avail.

What vision of God do these men have? They seem to have a pretty well-developed idea that God would not want them to abandon Jonah to the waves, and that if they did so, they would be bringing guilt upon themselves. They recognise that God does not work in the way of human beings.

Yet, they also realise that if God does not work according to human agendas, and if this prophet really is telling things as they are, they must obey this command to throw Jonah into the sea. Their prayer is painfully polite, as if they are taking their first steps to address this God, and don't know what the appropriate terms are: "Dear Sir..? Please would you mind..?" Despite this, they show obedience and respect: "You, O lord, have done as it pleased you." Even though they are called to do something detestable, and try to avoid it, they obey.

Some commentators portray the sailors as vague agents in Jonah's bigger story, as if they don't matter beyond advancing the plot, but that would be missing some very important details.

The sailors are transformed as a consequence of this encounter with Jonah and the stormy sea. Their attitude changed: "Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows." They don't simply shrink away in terror and make placating offerings, they also make vows. They take on promises. Whilst we do not know what those vows were, they are making promises that will affect their lives from this very moment. God has transformed them.

Jonah continues to be part of the process of transforming people's lives despite his reluctance to speak out. He's trying to run away, but he cannot escape. He has tried to defy God by setting sail on the ocean, imagining that the sea will act as a barrier between him and God, but the stormy waves themselves speak out.

Furthermore, even when he thinks that he's going to die, and that death will be the final separation between him and God, "God provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah."

Jonah has not bargained for the way in which God's love for him and for all humanity comes and reaches out for him wherever he goes.

What is the message for us in this? The idea of God being everywhere could seem quite intimidating: the Psalmist in Psalm 139 writes: "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

Read Psalm 139: 1-12 for yourself, slowly and carefully. What are your responses to God as you do so?

Yet let's look at what we learn about **God's character** from this episode. He is the creator of everything, and is active in his creation, stirring up the waves and then stilling them again. His creation is infinitely varied - not only in the different moods of the sea, but in the big fish which he provided. God's creation is beyond our imagination. He uses his creation to gain a response from humanity: Jonah explains to the sailors why the storm is raging, and they are in awe. The irony is that Jonah does not appreciate the awesome way in which God is working through him, despite his defiance.

How do we respond to God's creation? What aspects of it can you give thanks for today?

So, amongst our thoughts and meditations this Lent, let's ask God for renewed vision, that we would be enabled to see the world through his eyes, and not try to make God after our own image.

