

Wot? No Whale?
4: A Sweet and Sour Story Jonah 3:6-4:1 -

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry.

Sweetness

Repentance comes to Nineveh from the greatest to the least. The king, a man of great temporal power gets up, divests himself of all his finery, and sits down in ashes. All the trappings of his great position are set aside as he lowers himself into the dirt. He makes himself as nothing. Compare that to the way that Jonah behaves, where he gets up to deliver his prophecy, but sits down in anger.

The king shows fear and humility: he does not presume that God will change his mind. Not only does he cast aside his personal power, but he uses his influence on all his subjects to make them repent. The intensity of their actions is demonstrated by the way in which even the livestock are made to wear sackcloth.

The king recognises that they have all done wrong: they all must turn from their evil ways and the violence that is in their hands. All their fine clothes, their ability to intimidate others and hide dangerous weapons in the folds of their garments are removed. They are all caught up in an act of mass repentance.

The Ninevites do not simply feel sorry and show good intentions to behave better, but act accordingly.

Reflect: Savour the sweetness, and touch of humour in that image of the Ninevites being so sorry that even the animals are wrapped up in sackcloth.

Are there any things over which you wish to lament and turn away from today?

We are presented with the sweetness of a loving, merciful God who changes his mind. This is not a sign of a capricious God who can be appeased by grand gestures.

Rather, it is a sign of a loving God whose eternal desire is to find ways of reaching out and saving even those who are thought to be beyond redemption.

The sweet message is of God's grace. He is a God who desires to build relationships, who responds to humanity in love. Jonah is oblivious to the fact that God deals with each of us according to his love, not our unworthiness, or sense of our own worthiness. The unlovable, angry Jonah is shown mercy upon mercy - this rebellious, angry prophet could have been another piece of food digesting in the belly of the big fish, but he is freed to be used in new ways.

Reflect: Where have you experienced God's sweetness? Reflect on God's grace and rest in it now.



Rublev's Icon of the Trinity

Sour

“Envy is when you resent God’s goodness in other people’s lives and ignore God’s goodness in your own life.” So says Craig Groeschel. But I think it’s a helpful way of framing Jonah’s behaviour here in the final chapter of the book.

Jonah’s anger seems like the flounce of a petulant child. He is angry that God has responded to the prophetic message which he called Jonah to deliver in a way that did not fit in with Jonah’s personal plans. And before we look on Jonah with pity or scorn, let us look at ourselves. Do we get angry when we think that our prayers are going unanswered, or find that they are answered, but not in the way that we wanted? Do we make God in our own image, and find it hard to cope when he bursts through our imagination and turns it upside down?

Jonah’s anger stems from several objections against God: He thinks God has let Nineveh off lightly. Surely God should only show compassion to his chosen people, Israel, not to this wicked nation. His own reputation as a prophet has been damaged.

Jonah saw the message of the city of Nineveh being overthrown meaning that it would be destroyed, but God’s view is very different. Some Jewish commentators suggest that a better interpretation is that the city would be “turned round” - the meaning of repentance, of turning direction. ‘Overthrown’ in its destructive sense would have been the consequence if the Ninevites had not heeded the prophecy.

Reflect: Try using this prayer: Oh God, I am hellishly angry; I think so-and-so is a swine; I am tortured by worry about this or that; I am pretty certain that I have missed my chances in life; this or that has left me feeling terribly depressed. But nonetheless here I am like this, feeling both bloody and bloody-minded, and I am going to stay here for five minutes. You are most unlikely to give me anything. I know that. But I am going to stay for the five minutes nonetheless. (Harry Williams)

And now, having sat with those feelings, take a closer look at Rublev’s icon. It tells the story of Abraham welcoming the strangers at Mamre, and being blessed by them for his hospitality, for they were angels of God.

The picture also points to the generous table fellowship of the Holy Trinity. Look at the way their wings create a semicircle round the table, and their fingers point towards the chalice. Notice the feet of the two angels on the right and left, gesturing towards an empty space. Draw into that space and sit with them.