

Wot? No Whale?

5: Jonah 4: God Speaks - To Whom?

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' ⁴ And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶ The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

⁹ But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

The book of Jonah is indeed a prophecy which "tells us how it is" - that God lovingly provides for Jonah, and for us. He endures Jonah's, and our, fits of rage and pique. He does not condemn Jonah, or us, and nor does he condemn the evil Ninevites, who, according to the measure Jonah wants to use, should have been destroyed. He repeatedly rescues Jonah, using his creation to minister to him - the storm as a sharp corrective, the big fish, the gourd, the worm, the searing sunshine, even though Jonah fails to comprehend this fully.

God's response to Jonah's prayers in which he complains about God's consistently merciful, loving nature is not to be provoked to anger, but to engage in an intimate conversation with him. God is "reasoning together"

with his creation, even when Jonah's responses are unreasonable and self-absorbed. God repeats his question: "Is it right for you to be angry?" He does not force an answer from Jonah, and you may be reminded of the way that Jesus used questions to conclude some of his parables, leaving his audience to consider their response.

God does not tell Jonah to be quiet and stop complaining. The way is left open for a response, and that way is paved with compassion and steadfast love.

Reflect: Are there angry thoughts or hurts which you holding on to today? How might God want you to receive his words: "Is it right for you to be angry?"

We might be tempted to laugh at Jonah's self-importance. He makes himself sick with anger and wants to die because God fails to behave as he would like him to do. Ironically, his anger at God is purely self-destructive, standing in contrast to the Ninevites and the sailors, whose desire to live sees them turn from their former ways and make sacrifices to God.

Jonah's behaviour and attitude throughout the chapter is layered with irony. Jonah makes himself a booth from which he can watch the city from a distance. The Jewish festival of Booths - Sukkoth - is a time when Israel is invited to welcome strangers in an act of open hospitality, remembering God's protection and provision as they wandered through the wilderness.

Jonah thinks he can build his own way out of his anger, yet its shade is ineffectual and quickly abandoned when compared to the leafy, dappled shade of the gourd, which God creates out of his boundless goodness for the express purpose of saving Jonah from discomfort. Jonah cannot comprehend God's provision or what it might signify. In his anger and desire to die because what he sees as "his" plant has been eaten by a worm, and the resulting pain of sunburn, Jonah fails to grasp the message that we will all be eaten by worms and decay on a day not of our own choosing. He clings to the gourd as a possession, grieving over a thing which he did not even plant, and over which he has no control. The death of a plant which grew like a weed makes him wish for his own death, yet he has no concern for the condition of other humans, the Ninevites.

Who then, is the real wicked person in the book of Jonah? We might now readily see it as Jonah, just as much as it is the people of Nineveh. But what

about us? Our current social and political climate encourages us to follow a culture of blame, of decrying the “other”; when we speak about “they”, we build a barrier between “them” and “us”.

Reflect: *How do those descriptions of “the other” permeate our lives? Look out for language and images which convey a sense of “them and us” in newspapers, online or in broadcast news. What would happen if the story were retold with different pronouns and different illustrations? Ask God to guide your use of language today.*

We conclude our exploration of the book of Jonah with a challenge far greater than Jonah’s. God’s compassion is for people “who do not know their right hand from their left.” Is that the way we view others? How do God’s words at the end of the book challenge our own sense of judgement and self-worth? What compassionate prayers and actions can we offer in response?

What about us? We’ve shared gentle smiles and laughter at Jonah’s exploits during our meditations. Yet, as we gather all our thoughts at the end of our explorations, what happens if we substitute the name of Jonah in the story with our own?

“You are laughing? If the name is changed, the story is about YOU.” -
Horace, *Satires* 1.1.69

Reflection: *Jonah is silent at the end of the book. Let your imagination play over the final chapter of the book, and sit with him.*