

Jonah 1 – The Rebel (Mark 4:35-41) 3rd June 2018

What's the hardest thing you've ever been asked to do? (PAIRS)

Sure there were a range of responses – if you work in medical profession, literal life and death decision; perhaps you had to do something difficult at work like fire someone; or maybe it was hard news given to someone you love. Many would say that raising kids was the hardest thing – the best as well, probably, but incredibly demanding, too.

Thinking about that question is a great intro to book of Jonah – famous story but also hardly ever studied. Which is interesting because he was the only prophet who Jesus likened himself to directly: 'just as Jonah was 3 nights in belly of whale, so the Son of Man will be 3 nights in heart of earth (gospel reading two weeks' time).

Many of you may know the general thread too – in a nutshell, God tells Jonah to go and preach about a coming judgment on the world's biggest city at the time, Nineveh. Jonah doesn't want to, so he runs away and boards a ship. A storm blows up, it becomes clear that Jonah is the cause of this storm, so he gets thrown overboard and swallowed by a whale or huge fish, who vomits him onto land 3 days later. Jonah then goes and preaches as God intended, Nineveh actually listens and repents. God has mercy on them, and Jonah is angry about that. The book ends with God reminding a petulant Jonah that everyone matters to him, he loves the Ninevites too.

So I imagine most people know the story of Jonah and the whale, even many people who've been nowhere near a church, it sits alongside Daniel in the lion's den and David and Goliath as probably the 3 most well known OT stories. But very few know what it means. The whale kind of gets in the way, doesn't it? As a 50-ton creature tends to do. My family will tell you that one of my favourite places on earth is the blue whale room at the Natural History Museum. I used to go as a child, and just tremble at the sheer size of it. Even now, if we go to the museums, we'll never visit South Ken without a trip to the whale room, it's like a pilgrimage for me.

If you know the room I mean, you'll also know that that room is full of other impressive animals – elephants, hippos, zebras, manatees, other huge fish – but really all you can see is the whale. It dominates everything. Which is exactly why we lose our way with Jonah. *We just can't see around the whale. It dominates the book as it dominates the room in the museum.*

So this is why we're giving a whole 4 weeks to a tiny book – it's just 2 pages in the blue bible, 4 short chapters. But each chapter has something to tell us, and the overall point of the book is often missed. It's actually nothing to do with the whale, really – that's just a prop for the main story. So we're going to attempt something difficult this month – we're going to see round the whale and think about the full story of Jonah – the rebel, the rescued, the prophet and the protester.

But before we look at chapter 1 for a few minutes, **it's worth asking the question everyone secretly asks when they look at this story? Is it true? Did it actually happen?**

Let's start with what we definitely know: Jonah was a real man, and a real prophet. He's mentioned in another book of the bible – 2 Kings 14 – as being a prophet from a town called Gath Hopher who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel. This means we can date his activity fairly accurately to around 770BC. Gath Hopher is actually very close to Nazareth, and he was revered as a local hero there, so interestingly Jonah would have been very familiar to the young Jesus growing up. It may also explain Jesus' particular connection with him.

This area was very cosmopolitan, as a major global road ran through it – any travellers between Europe and Asia or between Africa and Arabia had to use it. The South of Israel was more cut off and more nationalistic, but the North would have had much more contact with people from other nations. So Jonah, just like Jesus, grew up with diversity, he's just the sort of prophet God would call to a foreign city.

So we can be fairly sure that Jonah was a real prophet in the 8th century, and that if anyone was called to minister in the capital of Assyria, Jonah would be a good choice. The Ninevites were brutal but religious, with an innate respect for holy men, so it's also entirely possible that they would listen to a message from God. They had no particular axe to grind with Israel, their main rivalry was beyond Israel in Egypt, Israel was unfortunate in being a small nation in the way.

I guess the main thing people wonder about is whether the whole whale thing could have happened, and whether that means it's all a myth. Let's disentangle the two questions for a moment. As we've seen, it's very likely the prophetic element of the book is historical, the Jewish people have always treated it as such, and Jesus certainly referred to Jonah as a historical figure with a historical mission in Nineveh. Whatever you conclude about the whale doesn't affect that, the meaning of the story is the same. In fact there are several miracles recorded in the book, of which the whale is only the most famous:

God makes and then calms a storm, the sailors' lots draw Jonah at supposed random, God makes a plant grow quickly and then sends a worm to eat it, and finally a hot wind blows in at God's command. The issue is less about the whale than about miracles generally. If we believe in a God who can change nature at his will, then anything is possible. In fact it's likely from the details in his song in ch2 that Jonah dies in the sea before being swallowed, so the story could be about resurrection. That Jesus uses Jonah to illustrate his own death and resurrection makes this more likely, and removes any fretting about whether someone can stay alive inside a whale. It's just another diversion from the main story.

So what is the story of ch1, and what does it mean for us today? In the last 5 minutes, two very simple points:

If God calls you to do something, it's best to do it! That's the clear message of ch1, isn't it? Jonah runs away because he doesn't want to do what God told him to do. It's worth saying that the issue *isn't primarily fear* – when the boat was in danger he was willing to die to save the others, and he is already a prophet under a dangerous king. *Nor was it intolerance of other nations per se* – yes, the Ninevites were non-Jews, but the ship he took was going to another Gentile city, Tarshish. *Nor was it political savvy* – saving Nineveh meant a stronger Assyria which was theoretically bad news

for Israel; but as a prophet Jonah's general message would be to trust God and not rely on other nations, so it's not likely he would be thinking like a politician.

No, as ch4 makes clear, Jonah just wasn't happy about how merciful God was – to Israel or anyone else. To Jonah, judgment means judgment – how many second chances should someone be allowed? Is God too soft, or what? **We'll think in more detail about that in 3 weeks' time, so I won't spoil B's thunder now.**

Whatever the reason, Jonah decides not to do what God asks, so he runs in the opposite direction. And this makes the second point, which is hardly ever reflected on: **God allows him to do that.** Yes, he makes it clear to Jonah that he wants him to be obedient, but Jonah still has an option not to do God's will.

Here's where we sometimes get God wrong. We think everything is predetermined for us, it's all fixed. But actually it is possible not to do God's will. He will try to persuade us – but in the end we can say no. We need to remember that if we face a real dilemma over whether to do what God wants. Sometimes we can say to ourselves: if I say no, God will find someone else and do it anyway. And perhaps for big things, the answer might be yes. *But for the small areas where God calls, it may be that he really does need you to achieve his purposes.* You may be the only Christian at work, or school or in your family – who else is going to do that for you? You may have a particular gift which no-one else has at church – who else could do that task if you say no? You may have life experiences which God wants to use for good – who might not be blessed if you won't share them?

No-one's indispensable – my old boss the Bishop of Bristol used to tell all of his clergy that we should all have a big sign pinned somewhere on our desk which said 'I am not the Messiah' – we can too easily get into ways of seeing that God can't do anything without us. But equally, we are needed to achieve God's purposes. He does his will through real people with real lives and gifts and relationships.

So if God calls you to do something, I suggest you do it. *You may be afraid*, but Scripture is full of promises about that. He is your strength, he will empower you, he will make your paths straight. *You may have your prejudices challenged* – and that's a good thing, no-one is beyond God's love. *You may reason that someone else could do it better* – which is true but isn't the point. No-one would ever be awarded any job if the purpose was to find the best person in the whole country for it. And here's another one which Jonah didn't have but might be most important of all: *you may not wish to lose your comfort*. It might cost you some time, you might have to give up a leisure activity to do what God calls you to. It might even cost more than that.

The good news is that **Jonah is a story for rebels – the God of Jonah is patient and loving and his call remains true.** You might have been resisting something for years or just a few days, but God is faithful and strong and his call remains the same. My prayer for each us is that we will hear God's call on our lives about something this month – some an old call which God will bring to mind again, others a new one or perhaps something for the first time – and that by his grace, we will respond. The God of Jonah is the God of second, third, fourth, *many* chances. Which way are you running?