

Jonah 3 – The Prophet

In 2014 the Islamist group ISIS captured the city of Mosul. You may recall the horrifying pictures as they set about destroying any cultural artefacts, something they did wherever they went, most notably in Palmyra. In Mosul, one of the most famous sites they destroyed was the tomb of Jonah. You see, Mosul is the modern day site of ancient Nineveh, a fact which brings this great old story up-to-date. You can still trace the circumference of the old city of Nineveh, and it runs to 7.5 miles, or roughly 2.5 miles across – an extraordinary size for an ancient city. No wonder it took Jonah 3 days to walk through it, and one can well imagine that over 100,000 people lived there, as God tells Jonah at the end of ch4.

In fact, the language used to describe its size in 3:3 is ‘great to God’, something which our modern translation omits – literally you would say ‘great even by God’s standards’. *God sent his representative to the world’s largest city at that time – a great mercy mission to represent a great, merciful God.* That is the theme which lies at the heart of Jonah, as we look at ch3 today.

RECAP Jonah so far. Today we come to one of those great stories of second chances. Jonah in that sense is very much a game of two halves, and the second half starts exactly like to the first – compare 1:1-2 with 3:1-2 READ – only this time, the response is different – compare 1:3 with 3:3. The rescued Jonah is a changed man – at least a partly changed man, anyway, not entirely changed as we’ll see in ch4 – and in gratitude for his rescue he now does what God called him to do.

It’s an amazing tale of transformation, and today I’m just going to make two simple points to help us think about that story: **first, God rewards faithfulness and second, God is merciful.**

If you were Jonah heading into Nineveh for the first time, I wonder what you would have been thinking? As you lay on your bed in the days leading up to your arrival at the city, and tried to visualise what you were about to do, what might have gone through your mind? How many would listen, how far would you get before you were assaulted, would you even survive the first day? Would you get to meet some sort of senior official, if only to hear them pronounce your execution?

I doubt Jonah in his wildest dreams could have imagined what would happen next. First the people listened: READ v5. Then the king listened: READ v6. And finally the king decreed a complete moral transformation of the people READ: v7-8. Not that this was just a cultural or ceremonial thing, a charade you might say. The people were told to give up violence, to change their behaviour not just their clothing. Jonah’s mission was a complete success!

The scale of Jonah’s achievement can be measured by the fact that when Mosul was captured by ISIS there were at least 15,000 Christians still living there, and the Christian population would have been significantly larger before the Iraq war, perhaps as many as 100,000. The word of the Lord was still being preached more than 2,500 years after Jonah’s visit.

It is, by any measure, an astonishing achievement, *a missionary journey whose results were out of all proportion to the time invested: 3 days’ preaching, a city transformed.*

But the point here is not the scale of Jonah's achievement, but God's faithfulness. Jonah is a very ambiguous hero, in fact many commentators point to the fact that Jonah's faults and limitations are deliberately contrasted with God's greatness throughout the book. He's certainly brave but he's also disobedient, prickly, prejudiced and petulant. In short, he's a lot like us.

And that's the point, isn't it? God uses Jonah greatly not because Jonah was great but because he is. God is the main mover in all of this. And throughout God is perfectly, supremely faithful – to his own word but also to who he is.

All Jonah has to be is faithful. All he has to do is obey God. The rest is all God.

I think this is good news, isn't it? Jonah is like so many of the biblical so-called 'heroes' – a normal human being, with all our flaws and our faults, our blind spots and our limitations. God uses him not because Jonah is great but because he's faithful. He's not even faithful first time or all the time. He's just faithful enough – and that's what God rewards.

I think this is a message for some of us here today. We rule ourselves out of being used by God because we made a mistake in the past, or we said no to God. But God is the God of second chances. He's not looking for perfect people but for the faithful few. He's not looking outrageous gifts but offering of self. He can use weak, unsteady disciples whose heart is in the right place, who'll give it a go even if they messed up last time. Don't assume fruitfulness is all about you. God just needs a good heart and a bit of obedience, he is well able to do the rest.

I think the message of Jonah 3 applies even if you don't have a burning call on your life. Perhaps for some of us now faithfulness is not about tasks which God has given us to do, but just to hold onto him in a difficult time. I look around and I know some of you are in that difficult time. Jonah reminds us that **all God asks us to be is faithful**. Cling onto him, because God still holds onto you. Stay faithful, because in the end God always rewards faithfulness, in eternity if not always in this life.

God rewards faithfulness because he is himself faithful. It's who he is. **Faithful and merciful.** I love Jonah because we see God change his mind. Now I know that sounds a strange thing to say, you can all kind of debates about 'well did he know they were going to repent so he also knew he was going to change his mind' and all that stuff. But the point is that God gives not just Jonah a second chance but a whole city. Indeed even the animals repented! (READ v8a) That's a Persian custom, by the way, a bit of a flourish to the whole repentance thing, so it's not fanciful, it was a way that the people of that culture demonstrated the depths of their sincerity.

The God of the OT is often caricatured as being tough and fiery – and we must acknowledge that he is a perfectly holy God, who grieves our sin. But studded through the OT are these wonderful stories of mercy and forgiveness too. God sees a sincere heart and mercy triumphs over judgment in the OT, just as in the New. As the prayer of humble access puts it: 'You are the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy.'

God is merciful. Which is good news for Jonah, good news for Nineveh – and good news for us too. Nothing is beyond his capacity to forgive. And Jonah’s story points us to Jesus, doesn’t it? God’s mercy is not a free pass – it cost Jesus everything. As Jonah was in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man was 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth – cut off for the first and only time in all eternity from his Father’s love. All for us. All to demonstrate God’s amazing mercy, taking on himself all the judgement our selfishness deserves.

ISIS may have destroyed Jonah’s tomb, but Jonah’s message lives on. The God, whose nature is always to have mercy, is still in the mercy business, is still transforming lives today. God is merciful – to the world, to his people, to us, to me. Praise God!

Maybe you still carry some shame for something – take it to the God of Jonah. God forgives. He forgave a whole city who did far worse things than you. Do you imagine he can’t forgive one person? Believe it! God has forgiven you! You are the object of his great love and mercy. Your debt is paid and you are free. Don’t listen to those condemning voices, they are not from God. You *are* forgiven, and all God desires is that you take that message to heart and live gratefully, following him from now on. Where else can you find that kind of hope, that kind of love?

As I close, Milton Keynes isn’t so very different from Nineveh. A big, bustling place but the sort of place people tend to assume is not where God would do something. Surely God would go somewhere else, somewhere more obvious, wouldn’t he? Jonah reminds that God can do what he likes, where he likes. **Why not Milton Keynes? Why not with us?** All he needs are a faithful few ready to do what he calls us to do. Who’s with me?