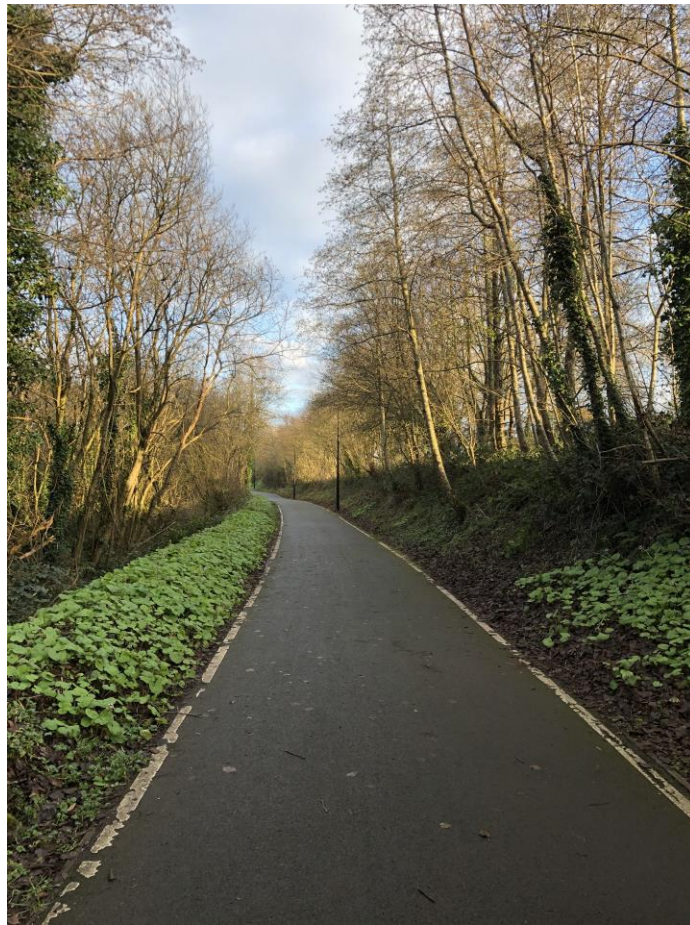


Douglas Union with Frankfield

Biblical Byways

17th-20th February

Some less familiar parts of the Bible



A Daily Lent Course

Written by Archdeacon Adrian Wilkinson

Lent Course 2021

If you turn to page 338 in the Book of Common Prayer, you will find a service written specially to be used on Ash Wednesday. The preface, at the start of this service, concludes 'I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Lord to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.' This simple pattern of daily readings and reflections is designed to help with the last part of that challenge.

This Lent Course is called 'Biblical Byways'. A byway is a less familiar or used route way, a minor road or path. When I was walking around the parish in January, I discovered some short cuts connecting different housing estates, which are not often used except by pedestrians. And so, this Lent I will take you to what are perhaps some of the less well known parts of the Bible which are interesting and fascinating in themselves. The material is deliberately short so it should only take you 5 minutes, but I hope it will sit with you for the rest of the day to encourage your own thoughts and reflections.

I have written this course with all of you in mind. We cannot gather to attend the usual mid-week and Sunday services in Lent this year. We are all missing not seeing one another. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot all commit ourselves to travel through Lent together. I hope you will enjoy these daily readings and be mindful of the fact that many others in the parish will be reading the same material as you are each day. You are on your Lenten journey with them.

Adrian Wilkinson



Ash Wednesday – 17th February 2021

Jonah – An Introduction

*'Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale
Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale
Fo' he made his home in
Dat fish's abdomen
Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale*

So goes one verse of the song *'It ain't necessarily so'* from George Gershwin's opera *'Porgy and Bess'*.

The little book of Jonah, to be found towards the end of the Old Testament, has been described as 'a pearl of the greatest price'.¹ It is a short book, which could be read in less than ten minutes. Most of us have heard about Jonah and might remember that he had something to do with a whale or big fish. Perhaps you can remember dramatic illustrations in children's Bible story books with Jonah being thrown out of the boat and the massive fish lingering menacingly under the waves, about to swallow him up! It all seems a little improbable that someone should be able to live inside the body of such a creature for three days. Is it just an ancient tale written to amuse children? Or is it a book retained in Scripture to teach us all some fundamental truths and to cause us to reflect. Despite its apparent superficiality, does it have something really important to say to us as a church and as a society, trying to find a way forward in the light of our experience of a pandemic? I think it is the latter and I hope you will enjoy exploring with me this short book in the first 10 days of Lent.

Jonah 1:1-3

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

Reflection

To our 21st century minds when reading Jonah, the question comes to mind, 'did it really happen?' I think there are very solid grounds for saying it is not historical, but that does not mean that it is not true. If we insist

¹ Henderson Richard 'The Jealousy of Jonah', p. 9.

on its miraculous nature, we lose its miraculous meaning. If we see it purely as an event in the life of one individual, we can leave it there in the past. If we do not regard it in that way, then it is liberated to become our story and a story for every place and time.

Now on to the text of the first few verses. We can imagine Jonah living a quiet life, observing his religious duties and feeling confident in his piety, feeling superior to the Ninevites. Suddenly 'the word of the Lord' comes to him. This is a well-used formula in the Old Testament. Like many of the prophets before him, his life will now never be the same again. Note it is THE WORD and not just the words of the Lord. It is not about words to instruct him, but a call to enlist him. The call of God has come to Jonah and he must respond. God tells him 'to go at once to Nineveh'. This must have seemed like a death sentence. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a place where many of Jonah's people experienced atrocities. Today the remains of this ancient city are to be found in the outskirts of the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. Though still a part of the world in the news today, then it was the notorious epicentre of one of the most military, cruel, and godless regimes in antiquity. It was also a long way away, about 750 miles and Jonah was being asked to make this journey on his own. God knows what he is asking of Jonah. And what does Jonah do? He goes in the opposite direction. In fact, almost as far as he can go. Joppa is a port on the Mediterranean and Tarshish is generally recognised to be the Greek city of Tartessos, a colony in Southern Spain. The ship he charters² is about to take him as far away from Nineveh as it is possible to go in the world at the time!

We are reading this on Ash Wednesday. It seems like a good place to stop with the idea of someone going in the opposite direction to where God wants them to go. When ashes are being put on a person's head on Ash Wednesday the following phrase is often used. 'Remember that you are but dust, and to dust you will return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.' Perhaps this day of all days reminds us that the challenge in the book of Jonah is as relevant for us today, as when it was first written.

² The phrase 'he paid his fare' in verse 3 does not capture the full meaning. It is a humorous understatement. In reality the sense is like someone saying 'I don't care how much it costs, I'll charter the boat if you like, just get me out of here now!'

Day 2 – Thursday 18th February 2021

Jonah 1:4-10

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. 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. 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."

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. 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?" "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." 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.

Reflection

'But the Lord...' This is the second 'But' in the story. The first one in the previous verse is 'But Jonah'. The stage is set. Jonah thinks he is going to do one thing, but in the end, it will be God who decides. A mighty storm blows up threatening the ship and all who sail on her. It is perhaps hard for us to imagine how terrifying the sea must have been to the ancient peoples. Today we are familiar with GPS. Satellite navigation can be used to pinpoint precisely where we are on the globe with minute accuracy. We can predict storms and weather patterns days in advance. It was not so for them. Perhaps it is a primeval fear within us of getting lost or engulfed that still fuels our fascination with the Bermuda Triangle and the Titanic.

The ship caught in the storm has become a miniature community under threat of extinction. It is a mixed community because the mariners 'each cried to his god'. They have different beliefs and gods. There is a contemporary ring to this. People have said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were all in the same boat. People of all nations, religious backgrounds and income brackets faced the common enemy of the virus. However, it has also been observed that while we may all be in the same boat, we do not all share the same experience. Some are in first class cabins, while others are in steerage.

Some irony creeps into the story at this point. Jonah is the one called by God to fulfil a unique mission. He is the one safe in the hold of the ship fast asleep, while the 'pagan' sailors are the ones praying and doing the hard work of keeping the ship afloat by throwing the surplus cargo overboard! Here is a challenge for us all. Down the ages some Christians have tended to decry the collapse of standards, the fact that, in their view, the world 'is going to the dogs'. A complacent spirituality of self-righteousness that looks down its nose at others is not only unappealing but actually unChristian. Now the captain intervenes. He asks Jonah to pray to his god. This reminds me of the fact that sometimes it is those who don't share our Christian faith who are the very ones to ask us to pray for them. Sometimes they are the agents of God challenging us to take our faith more seriously. The early Christians used the symbol of the boat as a reference for the faith community of the church. Looked at in this way it could be said that, sometimes those outside the church, who are its critics, are the very ones who will cause it to wake up and look around to see the sinking ship and challenge us to respond.

This section ends with the sailors questioning Jonah. He replies with a standard formula – 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land'. By saying this, he is only now beginning to wake up to the implications of what he is saying. This leaves us all with a question. Do we sometimes allow the creeds and other statements of faith simply trip off our tongues, or do we think about the real implications of what we are saying?

Day 3 – Friday 19th February 2021

Jonah 1:11-17

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." 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. 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." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

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

Reflection

What good is your faith to you? Is it of any practical use at this time of pandemic? Does the church have any relevance for society today? These are the sort of questions we face from time to time. In a way that is what the sailors are asking Jonah in this passage. We are all sinking, we are in turmoil, can you Jonah, or your god, do anything to calm and reassure us? Jonah's response is twofold. He acknowledges his God and his own failures at the same time.

This is an important point for each of us in this season of Lent. It is also the foundation of a real faith. Now Jonah suggests apparent martyrdom. How odd that he doesn't suggest turning the boat around so that he follows God's command to go to Nineveh. Here Jonah wishes to save others but not himself. The crew ignore Jonah's suggestion at first and continue rowing into the increasing storm. Here are good men wanting to do the decent thing. This is in contrast to the more judgemental attitude of Jonah, the man of faith who should have known better. In the end, the pressure of the impending sacrifice reaches such a level that the ship's crew feel they have no choice. They are on the horns of a dilemma – we don't want to die but we don't want to be responsible for a death either. Their agonised cry echoes down the centuries. Notice how here they call upon the 'Lord' three times. It becomes a real prayer to the one true God.

Jonah is eventually thrown overboard. The response of the sailors is one of faith. They offer a sacrifice and make vows to the Lord. Faith is about giving both our possessions (sacrifice) and ourselves (vows) to God. God

is Lord of all. Note how pagan sailors are now men of faith. Bishop Henderson reminds us that 'the implications of this seemingly innocent response are enormous; Jonah's God is not a pet deity of one particular nations, but sovereign ruler of heaven and earth.'³ It is ironic that the sailors get this point long before Jonah does. Jonah now is swallowed by the fish and disappears from view for three days and nights. While he is on his own, he is not alone. God is with him and the learning for Jonah continues.

³ Henderson Richard 'The jealousy of Jonah', p. 36

Day 4 – Saturday 20th February 2021

Jonah 2:1-6

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,
“I called to the Lord out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.
Then I said, ‘I am driven away
from your sight;
how shall I look again
upon your holy temple?’
The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O Lord my God.

Reflection

The second chapter in Jonah is a little different. If you are reading it from a Bible, you will see that the text is set out differently. In many ways it looks like one of the psalms. Here Jonah literally and metaphorically plunges to the depths. While it is a serious section, there is still a little humour as we picture Jonah inside the belly of a whale singing these words!

The chapter begins, ‘then Jonah prayed to the Lord’. Note this is the first time he prays. A man of faith leaves prayer until he is in a desperate situation. As we have seen, even the sailors in the boat were praying, but Jonah leaves it until now. However, this is not unusual. If we are honest, we have to admit that often it is only in the most extreme of circumstances that we instinctively turn to God in prayer. Here for Jonah, prayer happens in a place of darkness. This is an important theme in some of the psalms. Psalm 139 reminds us that God is present both in the womb and in the grave (see Psalm 139:7,12). It is worth noting that

these words are often read when a body is brought into the church for a removal service on the eve of a funeral. Here we are reminded that there is nowhere that we can flee to, that God is not already there. We are never completely alone. Perhaps we find this both unsettling and comforting at the same time, however it is something important to hang on to in these times of lockdown and travel restrictions.

Note the movement in verse 2 from 'he answered me' to 'you heard my voice'. God is now the God of personal encounter that we can talk to one to one, as well as the God above, the God of the waves.

Here in the whale Jonah gets his wish. He wanted to flee away from God, to hide from God so that he could get out of going to Nineveh, yet now he realises that he doesn't really want it. He misses the place where God dwells. He asks 'how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' I want to come back to church! Like the prodigal son in the parable Jesus told, he wants to come home. But it is not as simple as that. He is being totally submerged, smothered, helpless....Up to now Jonah knew the right jargon, he knew the formula of faith in his head. Now everything is being stripped away and he is left with nothing. His religious foundations are crumbling beneath him.

People who have suffered from addiction often say that after you hit the bottom, there is only one way you can go and that is up.