

Douglas Union with Frankfield

Biblical Byways

Some less familiar parts of the Bible

21st-27th February



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



Day 5 – Sunday 21st February 2021

Collect for the 1st Sunday in Lent

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
Give us grace to discipline ourselves
in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Psalm 25:1-9

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies triumph over me.

Let none who look to you be put to shame,
but let the treacherous be shamed and frustrated.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord,
and teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you have I hoped all the day long.

Remember, Lord, your compassion and love,
for they are from everlasting.

Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions,
but think on me in your goodness, O Lord,
according to your steadfast love.

Gracious and upright is the Lord;
therefore shall he teach sinners in the way.

He will guide the humble in doing right
and teach his way to the lowly.

All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

Day 6 – Monday 22nd February

Jonah 2:7-10

As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

Reflection

Yesterday you were reading the Psalm appointed for our services on the 1st Sunday in Lent. You see what I mean now by this chapter of Jonah being a little like one of the psalms. Our passage today continues in that vein as we read the second part of chapter 2. Now at a point of total helplessness what does Jonah do? He remembers! Remembrance is the deliberate act of calling to mind things known in the past, an imaginative summoning that transforms the present and changes the future.

As I reminded people in my sermon last November 'Preservation is static. It's about conservation. Remembrance is dynamic and about the living. How we remember changes over time as new insights and information come to light. This is not preservation Sunday but Remembrance Sunday.'

What happens when Jonah remembers God? 'My prayer came to you.' His prayer life was reignited. He eventually got there! He sees things in a new light. Perhaps he sees his old vanities for what they are, a distraction from his relationship with God. As a result, he gives thanks to God. He now follows the example of the sailors before him by offering sacrifice and making a vow to the Lord (see chapter 1:16). Eventually he reaches the conclusion that 'deliverance belongs to the Lord!' This simple phrase is the hinge upon which this whole book turns. Jonah has learned two very important lessons; he cannot run away from God, neither can he do anything to rescue himself. These two facts are true for us all. In the end our faith is all about God's grace – God's free gift of love for us, undeserving as we are.

Now with this important lesson learned, it seems that the fish has had quite enough of Jonah over the past three days and nights and so spews him up on dry land again. Having tried to escape God's plan, he is now back on firm ground, he has a location and of course a journey to resume. There will be more twists and turns, Jonah is not a completely reformed character. Jonah finds the voluntary hell he has endured, as he thought he was escaping God, completely intolerable. The journey wherever it leads must continue

Day 7 – Tuesday 23rd February

Jonah 3:1-5

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

Reflection

Wouldn't it have been so much simpler if after being spewed out by the fish, Jonah was a completely reformed character, that he had learned his lesson and happily went on his way to Nineveh to do what God had asked him? But that would have made for a much less interesting story.

In chapter 3, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah for the second time. This is part two of the drama, but it is still the same word, the same message, the same destination. God is consistent even if we are not.

There is no rest for Jonah. He picks himself up, cleans himself down and then off to Nineveh he goes. But you can almost hear him mutter under his breath, 'Oh no, not them again. Why is the Lord persisting with THEM!' Now he understands the letter of God's command, but not its spirit. He is happy in his narrow sectarian world view to go to pronounce God's judgement on the people of Nineveh and to walk away and leave them to their fate. He hopes that God's message will not result in anything positive.

Here again the fact that Nineveh was an exceedingly large city is emphasised. We don't need to get hung up on precise details. Archaeologists have not found any evidence of a very large urban area in their excavations of Nineveh near modern day Mosul. Perhaps by emphasising its size, it is seen as a centre of great evil. Here is where the symbolic meaning of the number three might also be significant. Just as Jonah was three days in his personal hell in the whale, so now he spends three days crossing another type of communal hell generated by others in society. We might ask ourselves, just as God was still with Jonah in the body of the whale, could God also be found among the people of Nineveh? The emphasis on the size of the city may imply the impossibility of the task ahead but also the importance of doing so.

Another number creeps into the text, the number 40. It often appears in scripture. Noah's ark floated for 40 days, Moses and the children of Israel were wandering for 40 years and Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted at the start of his ministry. There are also the 40 days of Lent. All were times of testing and opportunity. The people of Nineveh respond to Jonah's prophecy and repent. Perhaps it is those who are not regular church goers, who have fallen far and feel distant from God, that are the first to respond to his love and the fresh start being offered?

Day 8 – Wednesday 24th February 2021

Jonah 3:6-10

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 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. 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. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

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.

Reflection

The people repent, from the lowliest to the greatest. The king exchanges his robes for sackcloth, he gets off his throne and sits in a pile of ashes. He is still however a figure of authority, but a humble one. He uses his power to extend repentance even more to all the people and even the animals! Here they are appealing for God's mercy and not like Jonah relying on their ethnic identity or religious inheritance. Here we see that both repentance and faith, expressed as works are the prerequisites for receiving salvation from God.

What will be the result of this dramatic change? 'Who knows?' but it is ultimately and completely dependent on God. Many years ago, an interviewer asked a number of people what they would say to God when they got to heaven. Some did not believe in an afterlife and declined. Many others gave some interesting answers. Rowan Williams, who was archbishop of Canterbury at the time, struggled to answer the question. He said words were unnecessary at that point. What could any mortal say. When pressed further he replied, the only phrase worth saying is 'Lord have mercy.'

God sees the transformation in the people of Nineveh, and he relents. This chapter makes many important points about people and their life with and without God and their response to him. It points to a universal truth for both the pious Jew and violent Gentile. Repentance and faith are for all, and not just the prerogative of the few. Jesus made this point time and time again in his ministry, healing miracles and parables. Have we got the point yet?

Day 9 – Thursday 25th February 2021

Jonah 4:1-5

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 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.

Reflection

And the story ended happily ever after...Not quite! Jonah was furious. He feels he has been set up. He is indignant but does not see how ridiculous he has become. He postures further. He blurts out like a cross child, yet there is also an honesty in his response to God. Here again it almost becomes a Psalm, a heartfelt dialogue between a man and his God. It is only with honesty like this that God can begin his healing work in the life of Jonah. He has the right theology but does not have the right attitude which should flow automatically from that theology. In this he is not unique. Many of us might also admit that there are times when we have the right knowledge but the wrong heart. We cannot put what we believe into practice.

Verse 2 is a wonderful description of God. Look at all the adjectives. Read the verse slowly and give thanks. What are the implications of this for you? How does God view you? What are the implications of this for the world and what should your response be?

Unfortunately, Jonah's religiosity and tight morality stand in the way of his personal growth. His disappointment with God is so deep he asks for his own death. His view of God, the God who is on his side and the God who punishes Jonah's enemies, is collapsing around him. The logic of an all-merciful God who accepts all who 'truly repent' is too much for Jonah and he embarks on a pathetic regression. He is like a difficult child who has not got his own way. 'I'd rather die than see them saved' he seems to say. We are back to a religion of 'them' and 'us'. Yet this old version of religion must die, not Jonah. The parent-child dialogue continues. 'Are you very angry?' asks God.

Jonah leaves the city and sit alone to sulk in the shade of a tent that he has made for himself. It is he hopes his fragile viewing gallery for the destruction on Nineveh. In his separation he has created for himself another hell where he is trapped in his own prejudice. It is a place set apart from where the real action is unfolding and where the mercy of God is very evident.

Day 10 – Friday 26th February 2021

Jonah 4:6-8

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. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 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."

Reflection

Here again we see that it is more important to see the metaphors in this story rather than to waste time trying to work out what sort of plant could grow that quickly. Jonah is in some discomfort. The King James version translates this verse as 'And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief.' His crisis of faith causes him 'grief'. To feel that your personal and communal status as God's chosen, has been eroded in a much greater plan for all people, is something very distressing. How easily we all prefer the religion of the tribe with our totem poles than a more inclusive and universal version. Yet God still provides some relief and protection to Jonah from the heat of the sun in the midst of his crisis and grief.

But it does not last long. A worm comes along and attacks the plant and kills it. What God has provided, he now equally quickly removes. When a coffin is brought into church for the funeral service, the words of the prophet Job are often read, 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord.' (Job 1:21) When we feel at our most vulnerable, we may say those words, but it can be nearly impossible to accept. Jonah's joy at the provision of the shade of the plant, has now withered too like the plant itself and all his religious aspirations with it.

It is hard not to feel sympathy for Jonah here. He is being tossed to-and- fro again, as if he were still on the boat in the midst of the storm. He is now so low he sees only one way out, death. In effect he says to God, if you are not going to destroy the city then it has to be me instead. But God is not finished with Jonah yet. It does not have to be that way.

Day 11 – Saturday 27th February 2021

Jonah 4:9-11

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." 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. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Reflection

Our journey with Jonah now reaches its conclusion. In Jonah's attitude and questions, we learn that at times it can be hard to be a believer. His view of God has been challenged. In this he is similar to Job, Ecclesiastes and many of the Psalms which also wrestle with the great questions of faith. However, the irony is that Jonah's greatest difficulty is not with human injustice or natural disaster, but with God's mercy. He is confused and a victim of huge mood swings. He is utterly exhausted and so in the last few verses, God takes over the conversation. God ends not with further instructions or debate, but with a touching invitation to see things from his point of view. He reminds Johan that up to now he has been totally preoccupied with his own view of right and wrong, his own religion and now is fixated on a plant that he did nothing to create but has now perished. God reminds Jonah of the sheer scale of the city of Nineveh and its large population. The people there know no better and cannot tell their right from their left. They are to be pitied.

Now we come to the central point of the whole story, the huge contrast in the scale of Jonah's pastoral concern and pity for the vulnerable in comparison to God's. Jonah is fixated on the welfare of a single plant – and even that only insofar as it affects his comfort. Contrast this with God's pastoral concern for an entire city. Here we also see the contrast between the ephemera; things that so often preoccupy us (e.g. the plant, our pew, our church building etc.) and the permanent universal intentions of God for all humanity and even all creation itself.

At the end we are not told what happened to Jonah. It doesn't end ...'and they all lived happily ever after.' Did he come to his senses? Did he accept God's wider view of things or not? Or could we conclude – well serves his right the little bigot! We are just left with a question. There is great wisdom in this.

As with the parables of Jesus, we are left asking ourselves where we fit in on the spectrum between Jonah and God. At a broader level, where does the church fit in? Does it have something of which to repent? Is there room for all of us to relinquish some cherished truths and be open to have our vision expanded; to move from the worship of idols to the worship of the ever-living almighty God?

We face many challenges in the modern world. Religion, race, politics and nationalism can all be mixed into a lethal cocktail. The Book of Jonah teaches us how God appeals to us within our freedom, reasoning with us, inviting us to consider things differently. With both humour and subtle skill, this ancient text provides us with a model for reconciliation and peace building in the world today.