

**Epiphany 6**  
**16/2/2020**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Jonah 2:1-10**  
**Psalm 130**  
**Matthew 5:21-37**

### **Jonah the miracle**

---

*In a sentence*

*The miracle of Jonah is a life which is lived in the midst of a broken world, confident that in all things we belong to God, and God to us*

The 2005 movie ‘Mr and Mrs Smith’ is an action comedy about a ‘somewhat’ troubled marriage. At one point Mr Smith remarks that Mrs Smith seems to think their story will have a happy ending. She replies, ominously, ‘Happy endings are just stories which haven’t finished yet.’

When does a story finish? We finished the story of Jonah last week with Chapter 4, noting that it ends neither happily nor tragically but with an open question along the lines of, Will Jonah become a miracle?

We skipped over Chapter 2 on our way through and now return to it at the end of our own telling of the story. There is logic to this. Scholars lean towards the conclusion that Chapter 2 was not part of the original narrative. For one thing, the story stands very well on its own without Jonah’s prayers inside the fish and, for another, the prayer itself – suggesting that Jonah now ‘gets it’ – contradicts how Jonah later behaves: as if he didn’t ‘get it’ at all.

It is possible that whoever inserted the prayer did so quite clumsily, not understanding what he was doing. Yet this doesn’t change the fact that what we have as Scripture includes Chapter 2, to be considered as part of the whole.

What the scholarly insight might allow us to do, then, is to read Chapter 2 as the last thing written and so, in *this* sense, the ‘end’ of the book. Chapter 2 then becomes the what-Jonah-should-be conclusion to the story, even as it appears in the middle. And this is how we’ll treat the chapter today – as an ending in the middle, and as something of a happy ending, at that, despite how his unfinished story then continues.

Chapter 2 is a psalm with many echoes of other psalms in the Old Testament. And it looks just like Jonah might pray, with its references to the engulfing waters of the deep. Yet the themes of the wave and the deep are found in other psalms as well, where they are clearly metaphorical and not at all fishy. This is say that the watery bits in Jonah’s prayer are themselves *metaphorical* and not really about being under the sea in the belly of a great fish.

The Scriptures are shot through with the metaphor of the watery deep. Genesis begins with God bring order to wide and deep chaotic waters; watery chaos wipes away all but the Ark and its inhabitants, the Exodus is a way through the Red Sea which only God could effect. Similarly, the Jordan must be tamed in order to reach the Promised Land and, bringing these waves upon waves to a kind of fulfilment, the symbol of drowning occurs again when Jesus is baptised into our humanity and we into his.

The metaphor of the deep takes the universal human fear of dangerous *waters* to make it human need and fear *per se*. Chapter 2 begins with Jonah crying out from the guts of the fish, and from his distress, and from the ‘belly of Sheol’ – the shadowy underworld of the dead. The important thing is that these are all the ‘*same*’. The belly of the fish *is* the distress, *is* Sheol. And these are the same as Jonah-in-Nineveh (Chapter 3), and Jonah in the heat of God’s grace after the gourd vine dies (Chapter 4). The deep is Israel wandering in the desert, and then weeping by the rivers of Babylon. It is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and Peter’s bitter tears after the cock crows. The deep is the church in the Colosseum, the reformer at the stake and the Jew in Auschwitz. It is the diminishing and confused church of our era.

‘Out of the depths’ cries the psalmist to the LORD (130) or, more the point, out of the *pain of being yours* here and now. And this ‘being yours’ is also important; there are other sufferings and cryings-out, but here the problem is that which comes when God calls, and the promise of paradise takes shape as an experience of hell.

The thing about such fearful realities in our lives – whether in the specific vocation of God’s people or any dire circumstance – is not merely that they might frighten us. More than this, they have the capacity to overwhelm us in such a way as to leave us still standing, in a Jonah-like, dead-person-walking kind of way. We become colonised by fearful depths whose name is legion and from whom we cannot even distinguish ourselves (Mark 5).

To extend the metaphor of the belly of the fish, it is typical that the *contents* of the belly tend to *become* the belly, as is reflected in millions of bathroom mirrors across the nation every morning! The constant temptation before Jonah is that, in his fear and loathing, he might *become* fear and loathing itself – something ‘fearful’ in both (objective and subjective) senses of the word. Fearing and becoming fear are the depth from which we cry, are the ‘*de profundis*’ of God’s people (from the Latin version of Psalm 130.1 [=Psalm 129 in the Latin Vulgate]).

Yet Chapter 2 has Jonah pull back from that fate. We saw last week that the deep which threatens Jonah is the scorching light of the grace of God. Yet, Chapter 2 ends with ‘Deliverance belongs to the Lord’ – The Lord is the *Deliverer*. Spewed up on the beach, Jonah is the same but different, reconciled now not merely *by* the grace of God – which is easy – but *to* that grace and what it will cost him: living with, and loving, the enemy to whom God would be Friend.

Standing on the beach then, his confidence in God the Deliverer just uttered, would seem to be the ‘happy ending’ Jonah and we are called to be: reconciled and stepping out in the light, the miracle of Jonah.

Of course, it falls apart again. The judgement of the book of Jonah, then, seems to side with Mrs Smith: happy endings are just stories which aren’t finished yet.

And this is hardly good news. Or, it isn’t good news if ‘ending’ and ‘happy’ were what ‘it’ is all about, are what *we* are all about, before God.

The thing about the Scriptural sense for the end is that it is never an end in *time*: we never get there – not even when we *are* ended, as we all will be. The end of the world is not our end and is not the final tick of creation’s clock. And so the sign of the end cannot be whether we are happy or sad, cannot be whether our story ends with a comic lift or a tragic descent.

The end, for faith, is neither a moment nor a feeling about that moment.

The end, for faith is a *person*: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end' (Revelation 22.13). This is what Jonah confesses at the end of his prayer, and what God waits to hear again at the end of the book: 'I am what I am in you'. In all things, we are hidden in Christ with God (Colossians 3.3).

We have heard it said that the 'pursuit of happiness' is one of the purposes of life, and indeed it is. But if a *purpose* of life, happiness is nevertheless not the *measure* of life.

Our lives are neither comedies nor tragedies. Our lives are simply our lives, and what matters in this broken world is not whether we died laughing but how the grace of God landed among us,

how we dealt with God,  
our true end in the unfinished story  
which is still us, unfolding here and now.

That God is the Deliverer is the good news – the 'happy ending' given before the end, that we might see that there is no Deep which the love of God cannot fathom, that there is nothing which can separate us from God's love.

Everything is our because *this* God is ours.

We have no other ending.

In *this* is life, in all its fullness.

---

*A prayer in response to the sermon*

We bless you, O God,  
for out of desire to love and enjoy us  
you have created and sustained us  
and all things.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed, we have fallen short of the glory for which we were made.

Forgive us when our sense for you love for us is reduced to our present state of mind.

Forgive us when we refuse the cost of grace in the work of reconciliation with other which grace makes possible.

Forgive us, then, the anger which might have been openness, the disappointment which was really misunderstanding, the despair which springs from being closed to possibility, the unkindness which comes from greed.

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you:  
Mercifully accept our prayers;  
and because in our weakness  
we can do nothing good without you,  
give us the help of your grace,  
that in keeping your commandments  
we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,  
for ever and ever. *Amen.*

\*\*\*