

Jonah 1:1-7
Psalm 107
Matthew 4:12-23

Jonah: I will make you fish, for people

In a sentence

The ‘great fish’ of Jonah is a sign of how God’s plans for the world are dependent upon those called to fulfil them, even Israel and the Church

We begin our exploration of the book of Jonah with a question, the answer to which might seem very obvious: why does God appoint a big fish to swallow up Jonah?

It matters not whether such a thing actually happened; in fact, for reasons I’ll not expand on this morning, it’s more consistent with the apparent point of the book that the tale *is* ‘just’ a story. For our present purposes, then, we’ll just take the narrative at face value and deal with why it might matter for the story that Jonah ends up intra-fish.

The obvious answer to our question is that God appoints the fish to scoop Jonah up in order to *save* him, with the emphasis on the ‘*save*’ rather than on the ‘*him*’.

Clearly the saving takes place but who cares that *Jonah* is saved?

Again, there is an obvious answer: Jonah himself. The fuller text of the book would seem to suggest this purpose as well; the whole of the next chapter is a prayer of Jonah, praising the God who saves those who descend to the deep.

Yet this doesn’t sit quite comfortably with the story. Jonah has offered himself up to death: ‘Throw me into the sea; that should do it!’ Jonah apparently resigns himself to death. Die now or die in Nineveh? A death for nice people is better than a death by an enemy’s hand. Surviving isn’t really part of the plan because, so far as Jonah is concerned, that would mean still being in earshot of God’s uncomfortable call to preach repentance and forgiveness to the dangerous and hated enemies of Israel.

Still, Jonah is saved and the obvious answer to our ‘Why?’ about the fish seems the right one.

Yet there are two other ‘hidden’ beneficiaries from the intervention of the great fish in Jonah’s plight which shift the fish from amusing comic image to a necessity for understanding who this God is and how this God works.

The first of these hidden beneficiaries is the crew of the boat. Of course, they have been saved in the sense that throwing Jonah overboard seems to have calmed the wrathful God. But the fish is not connected to this. So far as the sailors know, Jonah is dead. If they saw him swallowed up, they would not imagine him sitting inside praying but rather being digested.

Yet the sailors have not merely been terrified and then relieved with the arrival and then departure of Jonah. In the course of this short episode these Gentiles have become worshippers of the God of Israel. And they have linked their status before God to God's reading of their sacrifice of Jonah: 'O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of *innocent* blood...'

This prayer is answered by Jonah not, in fact, dying – although they do not know this. All they know is that the storm is stilled, which is the sign either that Jonah was not innocent, which they already suspect, or is the sign of what they might not suspect: that Jonah is not dead and so they can't be accountable for killing him. Of course, both of these things are true but only *we* know that.

God, then, does not save merely Jonah with the fish. God saves the sailors with the fish; an alive Jonah is salvation to the sailors. Jonah, who has fled the call to preach to Gentiles, has been caught up in the conversion and salvation of unbelievers quite despite his best attempts not to be.

And this leads us to the second of the hidden beneficiaries of the gaping fish: even God.

For Jonah to drown is for God's claim on Jonah to *fail*. But God is serious: Jonah, go to Nineveh. *Jonah himself*, as the *means*, is as important in the story as is Nineveh, the *purpose* of the call. God's word is not a general proposal that Nineveh might be have the opportunity to be saved but the specific proposal that they have that opportunity through Jonah. God's word, God's intention, requires that Jonah be the means of this possible salvation; there is no one else who *can* be the means by which this intention is met.

This leads us to quite a surprising conclusion. God does not merely save Jonah with the fish, or even Jonah-and-the-sailors. God saves God's own intention, which is 'Jonah-for-Nineveh'. God's word does not return empty. 'Let there be light..., Let there be peace, forgiveness'..., 'Let Jonah go to Nineveh,' 'Let them be fishers for people' – these are not 'suggestions' of what might be the case but a calling into being of what *will be*.

The ridiculous means by which land-lubber Jonah is still alive despite being thrown into the sea is, then, not accidental and not silly: God's intention for Nineveh is bound to Jonah doing what he has been called to do, and only Jonah. If Jonah dies by his own death wish, God fails. It is certainly the case that Jonah is not lost because the fish appears but more to the heart of the matter is that Jonah *cannot* be lost. At the risk of (only slightly) overstating it, we might say then that, with the fish, God saves God.

The chosen one is saved, the Gentiles are saved, God is saved, by the great fish. All of this is to say that, rather than being a comic interlude, the fish is a sign of the mystery of God and the world. The fish binds together the called people of God – in Jonah; those *for whom* the elect are called – the sailors and the people of Nineveh; and God Godself. Saving Jonah saves the world, and saves God.

God calls God's people for a purpose – for the healing of others – and this purpose will not be thwarted. And it will not happen apart from those who are called.

Though often interpreted a symbol of the three-days *tomb* of Jesus, the fish is then also a symbol of the *resurrection*. The fish does not bury but returns to life in the chosen one all that he represents: the God who chose and loved, and those for whom such a setting aside took place.

To put it differently, God is *for* the world of Ninevehs in every time and place *by* the world: *by* those in the world God calls to be the means by which love and reconciliation. This is why Israel matters, why the Church matters, why the Word-becoming-flesh matters. The word is carried on the world which it created. This is what we are for, to bear the word.

God creates, calls and sends – ‘I will make you fish, for people’.

Jonah 3:1-10
Psalm 15
Matthew 5:1-12

Jonah and the miracle of Nineveh

In a sentence

God's grace is realised in us as we become a means of grace for others

I remarked in passing last week that the book of Jonah is more effective as biblical proclamation if, in fact, the story of the big fish were not 'literally' true. That is, the message of Jonah is stronger if the story is 'just' a story.

Today we'll begin by considering a little more closely how that might be the case.

When reading Jonah, of course, we cannot but notice the fish. It is the most attention-grabbing element of the story, not least because it seems to be the most problematic for certain understandings of the text. It is the fish which precipitates questions about 'did it really happen?', and which becomes a test of belief about the text and about what God can and can't do.

And yet in the passage we have heard today there is an even greater miracle: 'And the people of Nineveh believed God.' This is not miraculous in the terms we usually associate with miracles, but the Scriptures cannot be held accountable for our not knowing when something miraculous is in our midst. In fact, most of the time, *not noticing* the miracle is the very sin of God's people.

Of course, we might hold that anyone could be converted under the right circumstances and that this is scarcely miraculous. Yet we don't normally behave as if this were the case. What are the chances that the wall will come down in Israel, or that the architects of Brexit could ever find the courage to sorry should it all go belly-up? What are the chances our governments – or, more to the point, the self-interested voting public – will have a change of heart on asylum seekers? These are 'conversions' for which we might hope but it is really *only* hope – in the weak and strong sense – we hold for them. It would simply be miraculous if such things were to come about.

So it was also for the Israelites represented by Jonah. To read the book of the prophet Nahum is to feel the vitriol Israel held for Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. This brutal people destroyed forever the ten tribes of northern kingdom of Israel, leaving only Judah and Benjamin in the south. Full as they were of their own power and achievement, and that of their gods, it is simply ludicrous that Nineveh would have a change of heart at the mere word of a quivering prophet from one its victim-states. It would be easier to believe, say, that a chap was thrown from a boat, swallowed by a fish and then burped up on the shore three days later.

It might be argued, of course, that the repentance of Nineveh also never happened. Most likely it didn't. In this sense, the book is no more historically true here than in relation to the fish.

This doesn't matter, however, because the book presents not so much what *happened* to Jonah and Nineveh (as if *something else* might have happened) but, more deeply, it tells what *can* happen when the word of God is spoken.

What 'can' happen are those things we noted when considering the fish last week: the chosen one is preserved, outsiders become insiders, God's creative word does not return empty. This all happens again in Nineveh: Jonah survives three fearful days in the belly of the enemy, Gentile Nineveh is converted and God's word finds its mark in both Jonah and Nineveh.

Such miracles are difficult to believe but not in the way in which the great fish story or the resurrection of Jesus are difficult to believe. On their own, those attention-grabbing flashes are quickly absorbed again by the dark. Yet, in the Scriptures, they are not things in themselves which happened to happen but rather serve to illuminate deeper realities which can be very uncomfortable. Of such deeper realities it is not so much that we *can't* believe them as that we don't *want* to.

As we will see in more detail next week (chapter 4), just such a reality is revealed by the conversion of Nineveh and the extraordinary conclusion to the chapter, 'and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them' (KJV, a more literal translation of the Hebrew here).

The book of Jonah places us in a relationship to each other which will sit no more comfortably with us than it did with Jonah. It is part of the affliction of self-righteousness that we imagine that we stand between God and those we do not like. They, then, must join us – must become like us – to get closer to God. In a negative way, this is the basis of Jonah's response to the initial call: if I don't go, the Ninevites won't have the opportunity to repent; they can't get God but through me.

We noted last week that there is some truth to that: Jonah is crucial to the mission. Yet, Jonah's position 'between' God and Nineveh is not as obstruction or filter but as conduit, and as conduit to all which is distant from God, even finally Jonah himself. Twice in the story Jonah is just such a means for others, despite himself. Who Jonah is, before God, makes Jonah important for others' standing before God, whether he likes it or not. There is more work involved with grace than we usually imagine.

Since the Reformation we have grown familiar with the notion that it is by grace that we are saved, through faith. We see something of this in the conversion of Nineveh and God's 'repentance'. But perhaps what has been weakest about our repetition of the Reformation slogan is that it has caused us to distinguish too sharply between the grace which saves and the works which are then hard to fit coherently into the schema.

This can lead us to say that we are saved 'for' good works – in order now to do what God requires – but Jonah's story presses us to something deeper. Jonah *becomes* what he *is* when he does what God commands. It is a 'given' that Jonah belongs to God – that he is chosen or 'saved'. Yet Jonah is also still *becoming* God's chosen, and becomes the chosen when he becomes God's own means for the salvation of others. In the call of God Jonah hears what he is in *eternity*; in his action Jonah becomes in *time* what he has been called: God's body in the world.

That ought to sound familiar. It is the being-becoming dynamic of Jesus' own baptism and temptation. It is the gift and call of all who gather around the Lord's Table: receive what you are, become what you receive.

To be saved by faith is not, then, to be insulated from the world of works, from responsibility. It is not to be in any way isolated from those others whom God would also save. We believe that God makes us whole *by faith* only when we *act*. Specifically, such faith is only held in acting to make others whole. Our action is the sacrament of God's grace toward us, and the grace is not there without the sacrament.

For Jonah and Israel; for the church; for Nineveh, Babylon and Rome; for America, China, Russia and Australia; for each person sitting here today or in a café down the street: salvation is becoming in time what we are in eternity – part of the whole and healing life of God.

The challenge in the book of Jonah is not whether such a miraculous thing can happen – is not whether God's word can turn the sinner's heart. The challenge is whether we *want* God to bless those who do not bless us, and are willing to be the means by which this comes about.

When such a willingness is found, truly we are in the presence of a miracle. In this Jesus is preeminent – the blessing for those who curse – of whom Jonah is a shadow.

Let us, then, say yes to God in such a way that the miracle of life-with-God-in each-other might be our very own.

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 117

Matthew 5:13-20

Jonah and the miracle of the repenting God

In a sentence

God is no weapon in the hands of the people of God but the means by which they will be reconciled to their enemies

Conventional wisdom holds that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Something of this sentiment, and its violation, is at the heart of our reading from Jonah today.

We've just heard of a third striking miracle in the story of Jonah: after the miracle of the fish and the miracle of Nineveh, now the miracle of the vine or 'gourd'.

This third miracle is perhaps the strangest of the three. Jonah has already settled under a shade he has made for himself, waiting to see what will happen to the city. Yet we're told that the vine grows and gives him shade from the heat, even though he's already sitting in the shade. If the fish has a purpose in keeping Jonah alive, the purpose of the vine does *not* seem quite to be to give shade.

The vine's purpose seems more to be that it should *die*, that it should irritate Jonah and so that it should open the way to the final exchange about Jonah's commitment to the vine: 'You are concerned about the bush', God says, 'for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.'

But this doesn't quite work, either: God's account doesn't seem to address the real situation. It is not that Jonah *laboured* which is the problem but that he is now again (despite the booth he built himself) exposed to the sun.

On the face of it, the story seems a little confused. More than that, it also seems overworked. Grumpy Jonah could have been as easily chastised for his angry response to God's forgiving ways without the credibility of the story being further undermined with another whacky miracle.

To find sense in all this, we must see that we do not have here a *mere* miracle, something which pops up and simply must be taken on face value. The appearance of the vine is something beyond mere divine power and does something beyond merely provoking a response. The vine embodies a truth about God, Jonah and the Ninevehs of the world.

Let's see how this might be so.

While Jonah gets angry about the vine, what he has really been angry about is God's reconciliation with the Ninevites. We've noted before the extent of the hatred Israel held for Nineveh. It is, then, is 'very displeasing to Jonah' that God 'repents of the evil' (KJV) intended for Nineveh.

But this suggests that what was *pleasing* to Jonah was that Nineveh had it coming from God: my God is the enemy of my enemy. And, if we take the writings of a prophet like Nahum at face value, Jonah was right here: God had a controversy with Assyria.

So the vine fits neatly into the story when it is both the great comfort and then the great distress of Jonah: when it is the *wrath* of God and then the *mercy* of God, for those whom Jonah hates.

‘You are concerned about the bush’, says God, ‘for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.’ My wrath has risen, and fallen away. But it is *my* wrath; *what business is this of yours?*

And there is the religious shock in the story of Jonah. God asks of Jonah, ‘What of my business is your concern, except you yourself?’ Or, in terms of the conventional wisdom with which we began: ‘What about my friendship with you makes *me* the enemy of *your* enemy?’

The gods of the nations – even the gods of those who imagine they have no gods – are always the enemy of my enemy. This is one of the principal purposes of a god: to defend me, to be the proof or the form of my righteousness in relation to others. My god is the enemy of my enemies simply because they are *my* enemies; God must be against them. I pray to my god in order that she might reduce you, or I invoke a power I believe in – perhaps some purportedly secular political correctness – in order to chastise you.

But in the story of Jonah, and as a recurring theme in the Scriptures, we see a different divinity in action. This One is not – because ours – *thereby* against those *we* are against. This God is never part of an arsenal.

The vine is God’s wrath for Jonah’s enemies. Jonah takes it to be a shield to protect him from the burning heat of God’s passion for those who do not even know their right hand from their left. The vine shields him from the blinding light which is forgiveness for those who ‘know not what they do’. And then God takes that shield away. The withered vine is the epiphany of God’s scorching grace – scorching, that is, for Jonah as he sees his enemies embraced by God.

The grace of God – that God ‘repents’ in this way – is the central problem which the book of Jonah addresses and is the meaning of this final miracle but there is another closely-related problem, what we might call the ‘political’ significance of such a repenting God.

What does life look like when our God is *not* the enemy of our enemies? What should we do if the righteousness in which we would hide will not shield us from our enemies but instead befriends them – makes them sisters, brothers?

We can, of course, trade such a God – such a righteousness – for another. And this where the book of Jonah ends. Though we’ll come back to it for another week or two, we’ve heard the end of the story today, and it is no ‘happily ever after’. The story concludes with an open question. Indeed, it is a request for judgement – *our* judgement on *God*: ‘Should I *not* be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who know not what they do?’

We know what the answer should be: Yes, Lord. The ‘friend we have in Jesus’ must also be the friend of my enemies. To be able to answer in this way would be to become the fourth – untold – miracle of the book of Jonah: the conversion of Jonah himself.

Do we want such a miracle performed, for all the humility and grace it might cost us?

Let us look to grow into the kingdom of heaven through a righteousness which exceeds that of Jonah.

And, in this way, may we become a miracle: a friend to our enemies, our Friend's friends.

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 to 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 bringing 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 ours 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 your 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 others 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.*
