

**Epiphany 3**  
**26/1/2020**

**Mark the Evangelist**

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

**Jonah: I will make you fish, for people**

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*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’.

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