

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalms 62

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

Saved by the world's shortest sermon

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

Satirists use humour to point their fingers at our culture and our strange or misguided behaviour. An example of this is *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift that pointed the finger at his 18th century culture exposing its pomposity, the decadence of its political institutions and the brutishness of humankind among the creatures of earth.

The writer of the story of Jonah was a satirist. When we remember this, the story he tells makes a lot more sense. We were probably first told the story as if it were history, so we got all hung up on the problem of Jonah being swallowed by the fish who delivered him back to where he started. Nobody told us the story of *Gulliver's Travels* as if it were history, so we never had any problems with the improbably small and large people and the creatures that he met.

Satirists often use humour, certainly that has been an indispensable feature of modern satire. The writer of Jonah may have been using humour – it's hard for us to tell because humour is so culturally conditioned. In Jesus' day it looks a bit as if humour was based on exaggeration. Apparently the idea of a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle was hilarious. Maybe Jonah is good for a bit of a laugh, what with there being a fish big enough to swallow a man and it taking three days to walk to the middle of the great city of Nineveh when archaeological evidence shows it was about three miles across. There is an appearance from a fast-growing Bodhi tree that might have been quite funny too.

I think the funniest thing about this story is that a preacher with the worst of all possible attitudes planted himself in the middle of town and delivered the shortest and worst sermon in all of history and the everyone from the king to the kitchen cat repented in sack cloth and ashes. My colleagues and I are obviously doing something very wrong on Sunday mornings.

We don't really know if or why Jonah was funny, but we do know why it is satirical. We know why some people would have squirmed when they heard this story. The story of Jonah was probably written about the same time as the story of Ruth. Both stories addressed a similar issue. I used to enjoy reading back issues of Punch. Punch, of course, was the source of satire. It had wonderful cartoons, but they only made sense, or were in any way funny if you knew your history.

Jonah makes sense when we know our history. The story was told at a time when Jerusalem was resettled after the Babylonian captivity. Hundreds of people had returned from exile after Persia came to power. They were setting up a new community and they obviously had high hopes for their society, and they wanted to establish it on the highest principles. They looked to the Torah given them by God through Moses where there were places that urged them to be pure and holy just as God is holy. One way to be clean was to refrain from contact with what is unclean. Laws therefore forbade touching dead things and eating certain kinds of food. Special rituals were prescribed for becoming clean again. One way of becoming unclean was by contact with Gentiles – mixing with people for whom Yahweh was not their God. All this was extremely praiseworthy and high minded, but it presented a very serious problem for many of the returned exiles. While they had been in Babylon they had not been so puritanical and had intermarried with the local population. Many of the returned exiles had brought their Gentile wives with them. Because their wives were Gentile their children were also Gentile. One's Jewishness is determined by one's mother. This became an issue of debate

and contention because there was a strong push from some powerful leaders to purify the race by having the foreign wives and children returned to Babylon – a form of ethnic cleansing.

The story of Jonah is a satire in that it sets out to challenge the prevailing piety, into looking again at what God is like. If you are to be holy as God is holy then look at how God's holiness differs from the kind of holiness you are trying to live up to.

Jonah was told by God to preach to the evil foreigners of Ninevah. Instead he chose to travel in the opposite direction away from Ninevah and away from God, forgetting Yahweh is God of all creation, of storms and fish. There is no escape from God and God brought him back. So Jonah went and preached his short boring sermon – “in 40 days Ninevah will be overthrown.” Then the whole lot of them repented in the hope that God would turn his wrath from them. This is exactly what Jonah was afraid of and it got right up his nose. Jonah was the kind of puritanical fundamentalist who believed that bad people need to be punished and that the sign of a good person was one who keeps his word. All that is proper on earth has come seriously unstuck when God says he is going to destroy a whole bunch of bad people – well that's OK, but what isn't OK is when the bad people become good people and God changes his mind and goes soft on them. As far as Jonah is concerned some of God's least endearing qualities are his mercy and steadfast love and graciousness.

The story of Jonah is satire because it is told to people who were just like Jonah in their pietistic fundamentalism. The story of Jonah is still satire because there are still pietistic fundamentalists who see the world in black and white, in good and bad, in reward and punishment. It is a pietism that is incapable for being gracious as God is gracious. It can have no mercy.

One of the reasons I think the story of Jonah has won favour in the Christian church is because it rubbishes the same kind of hardline attitudes that Jesus attacked in the pious leadership of his day. Jesus was found most often among the sick and the lost and the rascals and they saw in him the mercy and graciousness of God himself and it made a difference.

Hymn of Frederick Faber

2 There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea,
and forgiveness in his justice
sealed for us on Calvary.

4 For the love of God is broader
than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
