

Jonah 1:1-6 & 12 - 17

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

³ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

⁴ Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

(after some frantic discussion...)

¹² "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased." ¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. ¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

¹⁷ Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Mark 4: 35-41. Jesus Calms the Storm

³⁵ That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." ³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. ³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. ³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

The story of Jonah is a great favourite for Sunday School and primary school assemblies.

The last time I told the story at school we pretended to be the sailors on the boat and made terrible vomit noises. All good fun, and what's not to like about a story of being swallowed by a big fish?

The short story of Jonah is only four chapters long, but unlike the other four-chapter-story of Ruth it doesn't have the same happy ending, or perhaps more accurately it does and it doesn't.

Eventually Jonah goes to preach in Ninevah and that city of 120,000 souls repents and seeks God's favour. God stays his hand and the Ninevites survive, so that **is** a happy ending.

But not for Jonah. Jonah is furious with God because he hates the Ninevites, he would have seen them all slaughtered. Jonah is a very curious prophet indeed.

Let's examine the story.

Jonah serves God but only when it suits him. We are reminded that we all have free-will, God doesn't control us. The story is one of extremes, God is directing Jonah to Ninevah, but Jonah runs away despite believing in the Lord who is maker of heaven and earth and is present everywhere.

How might we connect with this part of the story?

On this first Sunday in September I wonder what issues might be troubling us, things we are avoiding, not looking forward to, putting off, ignoring?

It would be harsh to say we are running away from them, but we are reluctant to tackle them and might be fearful.

Some of our children are going to a new school and all of them will be in a new year group.

Work might not be the satisfying and positive place we hope for.

You may be on a course of treatment or avoiding going to the Dr to investigate an issue.

Perhaps there floats around the question of where you live and is it time to relocate?

It's quite possible to ignore being bereaved and easy to distance yourself from someone you need to forgive and

it's perfectly possible to drift along in faith, not really allowing God to be present and central.

We are not running away from these things as such, but a reformed Jonah might knowingly suggest that it's best to tackle things head on, than end up smelling of fish.

Chapter 2 of Jonah is like a Psalm and very similar to some of those written by David.

V2 "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry."

V9 "But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say 'Salvation comes from the Lord'"

So, we could conclude at this point that it would be the smart thing to face whatever we might be avoiding.

Rather than let things come to a calamity and THEN cry out to God looking for a rescue, better to seek his grace and the supply of strength to face whatever the issue might be.

But that wouldn't be the whole story or do justice to the short story of Jonah.

Because things don't always go as we would like them to.

Our default position can be

IF I acknowledge God

IF I seek to do his will

IF I face the challenges I have or I'm obedient to what God wants

THEN – things will go the right way, which is code for

the way I would like them to go!

That is not how it works, and the story of Jonah reminds us of that. The outcome is not one Jonah wanted to see.

Jonah knows God is merciful. He knows God prefers to save and is compassionate. He wants to see the Ninevites dead and gone. The outcome is consistent with a compassionate God, it's still not what Jonah wants.

(In both services Fleur Pelly shared a story of her own experience. She went for a promotion and didn't get it. It left her feeling angry and resentful and aggrieved. Then the whole senior management had a tremendous upheaval and there was considerable turmoil and Fleur wasn't involved!)

She then recalled it was about that time she started a prayer group for staff...that was what God was wanting of her at that moment.)

Two things go hand in hand. The first is to seek God's grace and get about the things we put off or avoid or know are going to be difficult.

The second is to let go of the outcome we want to see and let God be God. This is the hardest step of all.

Do we really trust God to work things out when it all seems to fall apart as far as we are concerned. Do we really believe His way and His plans are far above our own?

Our faith is based around an utter calamity being the means of salvation. The calamity of death is followed by the astonishment of resurrection. We shouldn't be surprised if God chooses to answer our prayers in a different way to the plans we make.

We must be wholehearted about the line in the Lord's prayer which says

'Your will be done, Your kingdom come'.

This doesn't mean we become fatalistic, shrugging our shoulders and muttering that God will do whatever God decides to do and so why bother praying.

Rather we seek to pray in accord with God's will, we submit (as Jesus did in Gethsemane) to the Father's will and we allow the unfolding of His will in His timescale not ours.

And that leads us into a prayer...

Loving Lord,

Forgive us when we avoid doing your will and avoid taking the steps to address our own need.

Grant us the courage to say and to mean, your kingdom come, your will be done. May we let frustration go and accept all things as from your hand.

We pray for everyone facing difficult challenges that they become the means of a closer walk with you and a deeper appreciation of your plans for us.

Our prayers we ask in Jesus name.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 7 September 2025