

Thank you Neil. How nice to have a reading from the short book of Jonah tucked away in the Old Testament. CARTOONS. Most readers of the bible think that Jonah is a made up story. Much within this fantastic story has been exaggerated beyond belief, and not just the Whale (or 'the big fish').

There was a *real* Jonah in the bible, a prophet who lived when Israel and Judah were under a whole line of Kings, each following one another going right back to King David. Each king is listed in the bible, how long they served and then one of two short statements assessing their time as king. The bible concludes either "He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD" or "He did evil in the eyes of the LORD". There are more that did evil than did right. Their people, God's people are divided, conquered, sent into exile to places far off in the north such as the city of Ninevah.

The real Jonah holds the office of a prophet, he is to speak the word of God to the King. He works at the time of King Jeroboam who in political terms seems to have been a bit of a success. He reigned for a very impressive 41 years, he extended the boundaries of Israel, and even today has 3 litre bottles of champagne named after him. But says the bible "He did evil in the eyes of the LORD".

Perhaps, then, the real Jonah was a bad prophet advising a bad king. And years later when someone writes a short story of a grumpy prophet swallowed by a greedy whale, Jonah is an excellent person to use as the lead character. He is an example of something very bad in the bible: God sends a person or people to represent him in the world and they either do nothing or, even worse, they misrepresent God.

The word of the LORD comes to Jonah: Go to Ninevah and preach. Ninevah is a real place but in our story it is exaggerated – it takes three days to walk from one side to the other. It is full of foreigners and Jonah has no care for them. He runs away and takes a boat in the direction of Gibraltar. The storm that then envelops the boat is huge, so great that the pagan sailors recognise that this storm is from God and each of them turn to their foreign gods and they pray. Jonah is asleep in the hold,

having turned away from his God, from our God. 'How can you sleep' says the captain, get up and pray (so says the pagan to the man of God). The sailors roll their pagan dice and magically *Jonah* is shown to be a man under a curse.

So, the pagans have found our God even though the prophet of God has tried to run away and then hide away. The sailors even understand something of the love of God. They do not attack Jonah, they do not kill Jonah, instead they try and save Jonah. They work harder, they row harder, they throw cargo overboard to lighten the ship, until eventually Jonah instructs them to stop and instead throw him overboard and save themselves. Even now Jonah lacks the moral strength simply to throw himself off the ship but needs the reluctant sailors to do the deed, to do the work of our God. They throw Jonah off the boat, the sea is stilled and Jonah is swallowed up by a great fish, the Leviathan, the whale.

And there Jonah stays, entombed for 3 days and 3 nights, until the LORD commands the fish 'and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.' After, we hope, a shower, he enters through the gates of Ninevah (ones that were destroyed four years ago by those claiming to represent God). I imagine a tired and grumpy Jonah reluctantly doing his job and telling the people the judgement of the LORD: Forty days more and you evil Ninevites will be destroyed. . No word of hope from Jonah, no message of God's love, of any possibility of salvation. 'I don't want to be here, I've told you what's going to happen, I've done my job and now I want to go home only this time I'm going to walk and not take that whale.'

When my grandma died we had to sell her house. Many came to view it and on one occasion it was my job to show a couple round. I found them rude and pass-remarkable. The man especially seemed to take pleasure in finding faults around the house and pointing them out to his wife. Somewhat irritated I joined in as I showed them every single fault that I knew, however small it might be, as we went around the house. I wished them goodbye, and shut the door. They bought the house.

Likewise in the fantastic exaggerated story of Jonah the opposite of what should have happened happens: The word of God spreads like wildfire across Ninevah from the moment the prophet opens his mouth. All the pagan people and even the pagan King hear the word, they realise that they are in the wrong, and they change, they fast, even the animals go without

food and water. 'And who knows (says the King) God may yet show his compassion and turn from his fierce anger.' And God *does* change his mind, the Nivevites are spared.

And now the stage is set for Jonah to surpass himself. He is not happy and has the mother-of-all-sulks. 'Is this not why I ran away?! I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love. Now, you, God, take away my life!' The Lord calmly says, 'do you have any right to be angry?' But to make his point Jonah sits down in the hot sun and continues his sulk. To make *his* point God sends a miraculous vine growing as quickly as Jack's beanstalk giving protection from the sun and the cool of the night to the sulking Jonah.

The next morning Mother Nature downscales from a whale to a worm, a worm that destroys the vine, God then turns up the heat of the sun to 'full' and Jonah feels worse than ever and angrier than ever. A long way from home and God will still not leave the prophet alone. The LORD calmly says, 'do you have any right to be angry? You have concern for this vine, a mere plant even though you have not made it. I the LORD have made it and I am concerned for it. How much more the great city of Ninevah? I the LORD have made it and I am concerned for it, for in it are a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. Should I not be concerned about that great city?' says the LORD.

Most of us know our left from our right but we are, in truth, equally helpless and in need of God. And what are we that God is mindful of us? Our world today seems strange and alien. Do we hide away or run away or do we choose to try to show the love of God, his grace, his compassion, and unlike Jonah to season our lives with hope and the joy of salvation.

The story of Jonah is a short book within our bible. It holds a message of the love and care of our God for us and *all* people and stands against those who are religious but misrepresent God. It therefore has to sneak almost unseen into our bible to quietly stand witness against and alongside other louder voices in our bible who represent God in a more exclusive and excluding way, framed often by tradition and nationalism. Centuries later our friend Jesus meets the religious who still misrepresent God and they hear not the love song which he brings. Today we represent God, with reverence and fear, for if we do not who will?

A reading from the book of Jonah (NSRV 3.10 – 4.11).

¹⁰ When God saw what the people of Ninevah did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ ⁴And the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’

⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

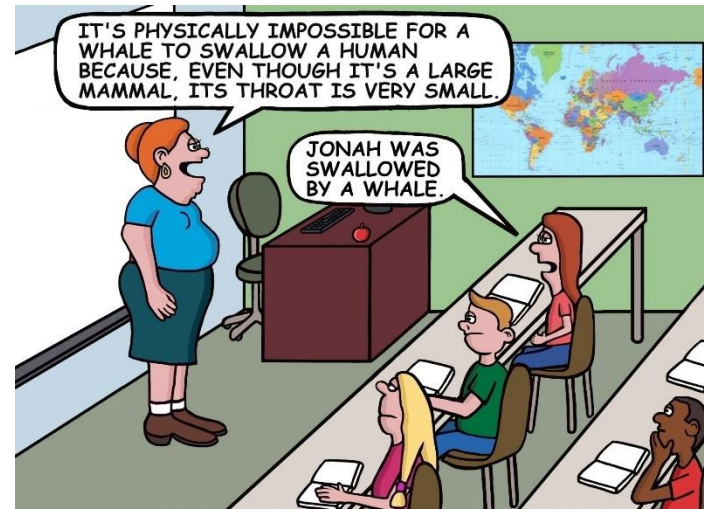
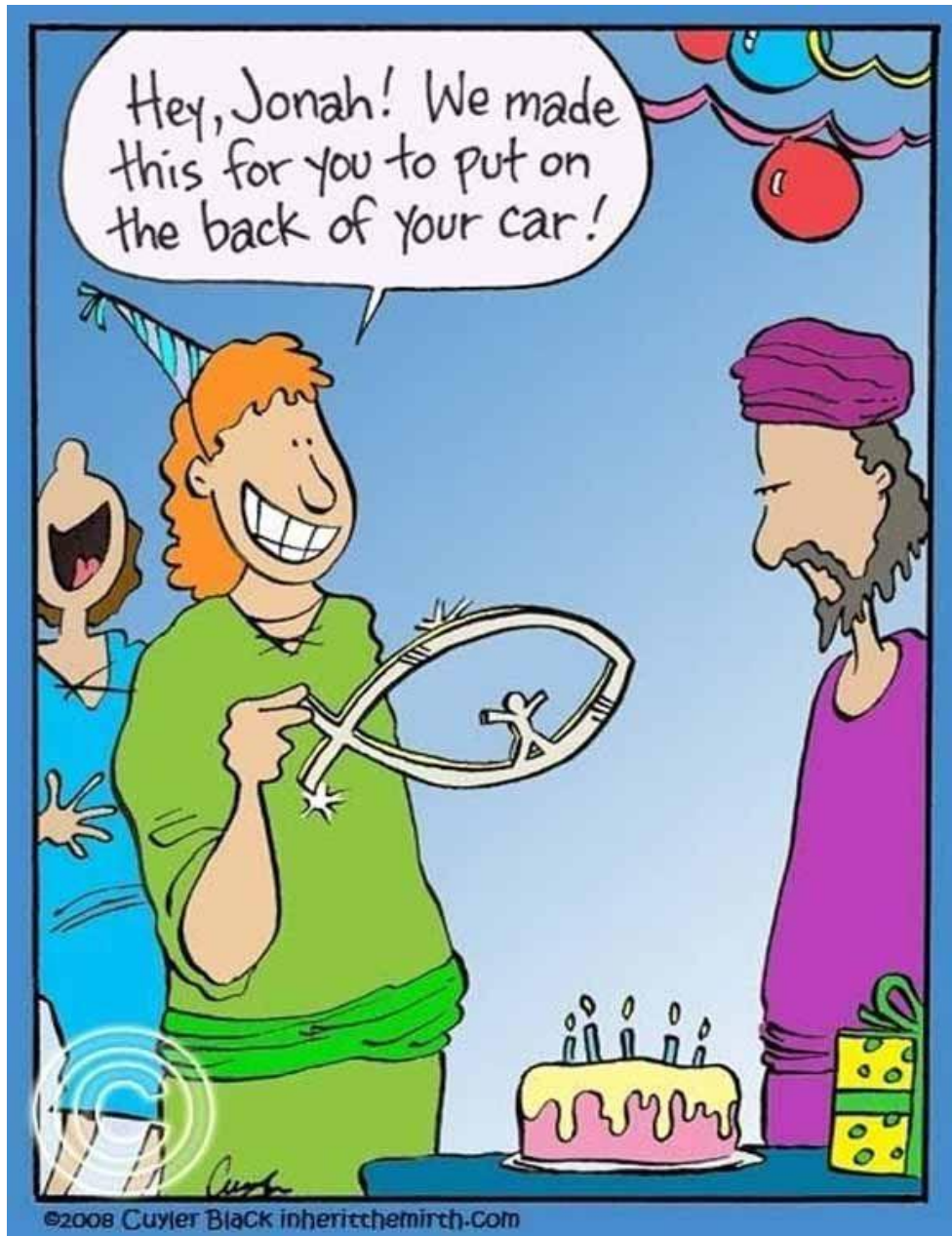
⁶ The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered.

⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’

⁹ But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And he said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die.’ ¹⁰Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’

This is the word of the Lord.

All Thanks be to God.



Prayers

We give thanks for the gift of this day.
For the people we see,
for the people we speak to,
and for the people who speak to us.
As we meet and greet
may we show your love:
your grace, your kindness and your patience.
Lord, in your mercy

All hear our prayer.

We pray for our anxious world.
We pray for those ill in body, mind or spirit.
We give thank for cures and treatments,
for hospitals, medical staff and carers.
And we pray for those working on new cures,
new medication and even better care.
Lord, in your mercy

All hear our prayer.

We give thanks for your kingdom to come.

We pray that day by day

we become more like you in thought and deed
with lives seasoned by love.

We give thanks for those who have gone before
as we pray for those who grieve,
remembering those who have died
and those whose anniversaries fall at this time.

Lord, in your mercy

All hear our prayer.

We pray that your church speaks and shows
the wisdom of God and the ways of God.

We pray that the world hears and follows
so 'mercy and truth are met together,
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.'
Help and strengthen each of us to be in tune with
your rhythm of life.

Merciful Father,

**All accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen**