



1 May 2016
The Fifth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Jonah 1 vv. 11– 2 v. 1, 10– 3 v. 5, 10
Matthew 21 vv. 28–32

My Favourite Book of the Bible

Jonah: I'm a prophet...get me out of here!

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Poor old Jonah! He's gone down in history as a walking jinx. The words 'bad' and 'luck' are tattooed on his forehead. Just as Jeremiah is synonymous with doom, and Judas is a byword for betrayal, Jonah is hoodoo personified.

Jonah is my middle name. Well, not actually, more in reputation. Every time I step on board a boat something seems to go wrong. A rope wraps itself round the propeller. A falling mast just misses a child's head. A bowsprit buries itself in the riverbank. We run aground. Bits of tackle mysteriously fall overboard. Almost inevitably the skipper ends up in the water fixing something, and cursing me. Unfairly, I believe.

As a result, I have a soft spot for Jonah. His story is an oddity. No-one's quite sure why it's in the Bible, or what it's trying to say. It's like the pilot episode of a TV show that was broadcast, but which, in the end never got made as a series. Left stranded and out of place.

Jonah is gathered in with the books of prophecy, but there's no real prophecy in there, just a one-liner. It's about as near as the Bible gets to a comedy – closer to a folk tale than anything else – and all the better for it.

Jonah himself has all the typecast characteristics of a biblical prophet. He's grumpy, pessimistic, has a lot of front, but is a bit of a coward, borderline narcissistic, and can't get rid of the critic in his head. We could be twins.

Let's quickly reprise the story. God, for reasons unknown, plucks Jonah from obscurity to travel east to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh, in modern-day Iraq, to "cry out against that city for their [unspecified] wickedness". Assyria, to the Israelites, was one of the great icons of evil rather like Nazi Germany was to Britain. They had a habit of descending "like the wolf on the fold". Jonah is less than keen, so he legs it in completely the opposite direction across the Mediterranean towards Tarshish, which might be Carthage, now Tunis.

The rest is probably familiar. The storm hits, the crew realize Jonah is, well, a Jonah, and overboard he goes into the gullet of a fish, or a whale, depending on how fastidious you are on its description.

Chastened by God, and smelling fishy, Jonah buckles down and heads for Nineveh. Another oddity about the story is that Yahweh should send an Israelite prophet to a foreign city to demand repentance on behalf of a God they didn't recognise. Why should anyone take any notice? Perhaps this was part of Jonah's truculence.

All the same, Jonah puts his prophet game face on and delivers the single line of prophecy in the book: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

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It's important to recall here that, built into the job description of a prophet, is understanding that no-one ever listens. You do some performance art – covering yourself with ashes, or – if you're Jeremiah – taking your used underwear and stuffing it into a rock until it rots. And eventually, the powers-that-be get earache, and drive you into the wilderness. That's why so many prophets are so angry.

Maybe this is what Jonah was expecting – fearing even. But on this occasion, didn't happen. The Ninivans say, "OK, Jonah, it's a fair cop, we'll come quietly." They're the ones who make with the sackcloth and ashes. The King of Nineveh declares, "All shall turn from their evil ways."

The people looked at Jonah. Jonah looked at God. God said, effectively, "Fine with me. Consider the Apocalypse cancelled."

Really? Jonah called for repentance, and they actually repented! It seems that, almost without trying, feckless old Jonah might turn out to be the most successful prophet in the entire Old Testament. He should be delighted. . . But he's not. He's enraged.

Thing is, I suppose, if you're a prophet of doom, you expect doom to arrive. That's your *raison d'être*. The *last* thing he was expecting was to be taken seriously. He's so angry, he turns on God: "Your trouble is that you're a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness!" It's like he's saying, "It's all very well you being forgiving when it comes to *me*, but this lot? Your standards are slipping, Lord. You're sending out the wrong signals."

Jonah walks off in a strop to a vantage point, and observes Nineveh, to see whether God will be as good as his word. The sun is burning hot and he seeks shelter, so – in the marvellous vocabulary of the Bible – God "appointed a bush" to provide him with shade, for which Jonah is grateful.

But not for long. . . God's second appointment is a worm which – just as the baking sun is rising – attacks the bush, so it withers. Jonah returns to his trademark misanthrope. But this time he's angry with the plant for letting him down. "Just kill me!" he says.

At this point God effectively grabs Jonah by the lapels and fixes his him in the eye. "Listen," he tells him. "You're worried about a bush which you didn't plant, which lasted a day and a night, because you're suffering from heat stroke, and yet you think I should abandon Nineveh and its 120,000 people to death and destruction? Really?"

With that question hanging in the air, waiting on Jonah's reply, the story ends, and the credits roll.

What happened next? We don't know. There is no, "Next week on Jonah. . ." As I said, this was never made into a series. The story just stops. In fact the story itself starts and stops, and starts again.

Jonah's story could have ended at any one of a number of points. Jonah runs away. Jonah is thrown into the sea. Jonah is swallowed by a whale. Jonah finds himself alive on the shore. The Ninevans take Jonah's message on board. Jonah walks away in a sulk.

But in each instance, God says, "This is not the end of the story." The big question that storytellers of all kinds ask themselves at story junctions – whether they're screenwriters, novelists, or biblical scribes – is: "What if?"

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In the case of Jonah, he reached a series of crossroads. At each point he made a decision which had huge consequences. Sometimes he said “Yes”, and sometimes, “No”. One of the good things about Jonah, truculent, and narcissistic as he is, is that ,ultimately, he says “Yes”. In this, he’s an echo of the reluctant son in our Gospel reading who refused to work in the vineyard, but later relented, as opposed to the obsequious second son, who said he would, but never actually turned up. We probably all know that scenario.

The book of Jonah is a powerful retelling of two hugely important subtexts – threads that are closely interwoven throughout biblical narratives, and which resonate profoundly with our own lives. One is that the most unlikely, the least qualified of candidates find themselves making history. And the other is that the story is: Never. Over. I can’t stress this enough. However flawed, or wounded, or angry, or difficult we are. However much we screw up – however much of a Jonah we are – there’s always another chapter, even if it’s after we’ve gone

We pause in our own stories, and ask God, and we ask ourselves, “What would happen if?” Just as with Jonah we find ourselves continually at crossroads. And, at every stage, God is our travelling companion. A God who is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

If there had been *Jonah: the series*, would our reluctant prophet turn out to be nicer, less awkward? I doubt it. But you’d hope that maybe he’d grow to know himself, and the people he lived with, better. Know that he was loved, and that when hard questions came along, running away was not the solution.