

Jonah 2 – A Merciful God

Chapter two from the book of Jonah begins with a prayer. Now, I know we're told to go and find quiet places to pray, but this prayer is in a very unusual location indeed – from inside the belly of a great fish.

Just to remind you, prior to Jonah being swallowed by a fish, he'd been on a ship on the way to Tarshish, fleeing from the Lord who had commanded him to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it. Jonah had seemingly forgotten his identity and it took a great storm on the sea for him to remember that he was a Hebrew and, through the saving action of the great fish, God gives him a second chance.

And so, Jonah, from the belly of a great fish, prays. He's remembered that he's a prophet, a man of God, and his prayer is very similar to those found in the book of Psalms, so much so that Jonah's prayer is often referred to as 'The Psalm of Jonah'. Like many of the Psalms, it's full of vivid language and, to describe his experience, Jonah draws on other psalms, those he would have known from childhood.

Jonah is clearly at the end of himself. He prays: *'In my distress I called to the Lord'* and *'From the depths of the grave I called for help'*, and often, it's when we've reached rock bottom, that we realise our need of God. It's at the moment of greatest darkness and despair, when no human action (certainly not his own) can save him, that Jonah finally calls out to the God he'd tried so hard to avoid. But, it's hardly a prayer of repentance. But he is, at least, talking to God again. And maybe, that's what gives his prayer a bit of realism because, if we're honest, when we find ourselves in the darkest of circumstances, we don't always give much thought to God; instead our overriding concern is to find a way out of what is causing us so much distress. We turn to prayer as a last resort, and, like Jonah, we may promise to praise God when he rescues us.

Whether for Jonah or ourselves, the great wonder of this kind of prayer is that our Lord, in his great love towards us, condescends to deliver us out of our frequently self-inflicted mess. Here is a God who is more willing to hear than we are to pray. A God who knows the words on our lips before we speak them, but who longs for us to speak them so that we may know he has heard our prayer.

Jonah sees God clearly as the 'deliverer'. The final line of his prayer affirms that '*Deliverance (or salvation) belongs to (or comes from) the Lord.*' But Jonah's salvation doesn't appear to be as a result of his repentance, as you'll notice that there are no words of sorry in his prayer. Was he repentant? Most commentators take a middle-ground - there's *some* repentance but it's tinged with self-pity. His quotes from the Psalms are where the writer is suffering because God has either abandoned him or his enemies are oppressing him. But no-one is oppressing Jonah, and *he* is the one who ran away from God. His problems are self-made. His repentance was at best very fragile and imperfect, which might give hope for us today, for repentance isn't an attractive word in our world.

You don't have to look far in the papers or on the news to see that people seem afraid to admit when something's wrong, whether it's a NHS Trust, a Police force, a politician or an individual. But guilt isn't our enemy. Without guilt, we would do anything we wanted without worry of the consequences. Guilt therefore is a useful indicator that we've done something wrong, and begs the question: *Does repentance need a re-emphasis in the church today?* Are we missing the mark if we talk about grace without also addressing the issue of repentance? We probably are, so let's spend some time thinking a bit more about what we can learn about repentance from the story of Jonah.

We first thing we learn is that repentance begins *today*, from where we are. For Jonah, that was inside a great fish. The message to us is that we don't need to shape up before we come to repentance; it's about the here and now.

We also learn that, through repentance, we affirm that God is bigger than our sin. '*From the depths of the grave, I called for help*' Jonah prays, '*and you listened to my cry.*' Yes, he's desperate, but he's confident that he's been heard and that forgiveness is available. But many of us aren't able to hear and accept that certainty because of the problem of shame; there's a heavy feeling inside of us and a worry that we'll never measure up. We think that our misdoings are bigger than God and we struggle to let go of the past. But the truth is, our God is so much bigger than anything we've done or will ever do, and forgiveness is available to all who ask.

The great poet and hymn writer, William Cowper, knew this well. Having experienced much loss in his life and pushed into a law career by his father, he tried several times to take his own life, such was the darkness he experienced. One day in hospital Cowper picked up a Bible and the pages opened to Romans 3: 25-26 and he finally understood that Christ's atoning sacrifice sufficiently

covered his own sin. He recalled the moment—*‘I could only look up to heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with love and wonder.’* Maybe some of us listening today need to hand some of our burdens over to God and live in the faith that he has so generously given us.

The story of Jonah also teaches us that repentance is a change of mind which leads to a return to the person of God. In verse 7 Jonah says: *‘When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you Lord, and my prayer rose to you.’* It seems to lead to a renewal of thinking; a turning away from sin but also a changing of mind and purpose. From the point of repentance, knowing that you are forgiven, it can be possible to embrace a *whole* new worldview, a whole new way of thinking about life, God and the universe. One that isn’t burdened by the past. And one that leads to a renewed relationship with God, just as the Prodigal Son’s return home led to a loving embrace with his father.

And finally, repentance usually results in fruit. Jonah says, *‘Yet I will look again toward your holy temple’*, but it wasn’t Jerusalem that Jonah was called to go, but to Nineveh. True repentance will see him go where he was sent. In calling the fish to spew him out, God is indicating that the key to Jonah’s new life lies with the pagans, the Ninevites, whom the prophet so desperately tried to avoid. And maybe he’ll go with a bit more graciousness and humility.

This chapter from Jonah tells us much about a God who is utterly merciful. Jonah calls on God from the belly of the fish, there because of his own foolishness, and, like an obedient servant, the Lord hears and answers his prayer. The Lord doesn’t ignore Jonah. He doesn’t argue with him, reprove him or make him suffer any more than he has already suffered; he doesn’t humiliate or chastise him, correct or punish him further. Instead, in Jonah’s words: *‘To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God.’* He called to the Lord in his distress and the Lord answered him. The Lord’s response to his call restored a broken relationship. The prophet’s action, spurred by his realisation that ultimately God was all he had, opened the door to new life and fresh possibilities. And, in opening the door, he allowed God to meet him.

Maybe, Jonah’s story speaks to you today. Maybe there’s something from your past that is holding you back in your relationship with God, something for which you want to seek forgiveness. But know this, we have a merciful God, slow to anger and quick to forgive, who simply calls us to come. The response is ours to make. The words of the following hymn might help:

*Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come.*