

Jonah 4 – A Gracious God

I love going to the cinema (not so much at the moment). I love a good film. And some of the best films I've seen are those with a twist in the tale at the end, where you say, *'Well, I didn't see that coming!'* We see this in the story of Jonah. At the end of chapter 3 where we read *'When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened'*, you might expect Jonah to be happy. To be saying *'Yippee! Hand me a tambourine that I might head-butt it!'* But he isn't. In fact, Jonah is angry. So angry that he's red hot with rage. He's fuming.

There's a double emphasis in the very first verse of chapter 4: *'But Jonah was greatly displeased, and became angry.'* These two words – displeased and angry – are used to make the same point. And, as we move through the chapter, we see that his anger leads him to utter despair. So much so that he wants to end his life. If this were a film, there'd be a dramatic pause, a sharp intake of breath as Jonah prays for death, not just once, but twice. It's a very unusual prayer: *'O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.'* Not the sort of prayer you see on a fridge magnet or on a poster in the rectory loo.

And the reason for Jonah's anger? His doubts about God had been right: this was a God soft on sin and weak on justice. Jonah felt let down. In going to Nineveh at God's second call, the prophet had given God an opportunity to demonstrate the power of his judgment against the great city. Jonah had faithfully held on to judgment, but forgotten love, whereas God had held out both judgment *and* love, and love had prevailed. When God repented in response to Nineveh's penitence, Jonah's real feelings broke through; he could no longer hold them back. Jonah knew that God would repent – we read this in verse 2: *'O Lord, I knew this was going to happen. That's why I ran off to Tarshish!'* and it all becomes too much for him.

This chapter teaches us some important lessons about anger. The first is that anger is not always sinful. Ephesians 4: 26 acknowledges that we get angry but warns us against sin: *'In your anger do not sin. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.'* In the Bible we read that God gets angry from time to time; his heart is stirred because he loves us. Jürgen Moltmann, the German theologian, describes God's wrath as *'injured*

love, that his anger is stirred by oppression and social injustice, so plenty of reason for us to be angry on occasion too. You'll have heard the term 'righteous anger'; sometimes it is right to be righteously angry. But Jonah's anger was more righteous *indignation*. He was angry because God's grace was cancelling out judgment and justice as he saw it, and if God was compassionate to these Ninevites, then there was always a risk that a future generation of them would attack Israel.

The second thing we learn about anger from this story is that anger can drive us away from God and from each other. Having expressed his anger and despair, Jonah parks himself well away from the situation. He goes off in a huff: *'Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.'* He waits out the forty days sitting just outside the city walls, hoping that it will be destroyed. While inside the city walls, the king of Nineveh sits in great discomfort in sackcloth and ashes, hoping that, just perhaps, his city will be saved. Jonah's anger towards God drives him away from God. He doesn't answer God's question: *'Have you any right to be angry, Jonah?'* and just stomps off and sits alone, full of self-pity and righteous indignation. And there's a lesson for us today in how Jonah responds. There's much that people past and present get angry about in the church, from the wrong kind of music played, the wrong words spoken, and the moving of pews and other church furniture. It's always better though – for both the individual and the community – if we can think carefully about a situation, think about the potential hurt that may be caused by our actions, and thoughtfully respond rather than stomping off. There's much else that we can do, including prayer.

The third lesson we learn is that anger can be part of our praying. Jonah is incredibly angry but we read at the start of verse 2 that: *'He prayed to the Lord.'* He openly brings his anger to God, and he isn't alone in that. There are lots of examples in the Bible of people getting mad with God and telling him. Jeremiah is so fed up that he prays in Jeremiah 20: *'Cursed be the day I was born! ... Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?'* In 1 Kings 19, Elijah, running for his life from Queen Jezebel, sits under a broom tree and prays: *'I have had enough Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.'* The Bible is clear about the depths to which we can sink emotionally, but we're encouraged to speak out the anger we feel. Remember the two on the road to Emmaus? *'What were you talking about?'* Jesus asks, and invites them to externalise what they were thinking

and feeling. God knows he has got under Jonah's skin so interrogates his anger: *'Jonah, have you any right to be angry?'* He doesn't desert Jonah in his anger, but tries to engage him in conversation.

Jonah is understandably disappointed and disillusioned with God, that God didn't do what he expected and wanted. But, if we're going to mature in faith, the fourth lesson this chapter teaches us is that we have to allow God to disappoint us. In his prayer to God in verse 2, Jonah says some beautiful words about God, some of the loveliest words in the Old Testament: *'... You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love'*, but who won't therefore always do what we hope he will do. Jesus also disappointed many by what *he* said and did, as they were expecting something else. But he *is* who he *is*. We need to avoid a vending machine view of God, only there to please us.

So, if we're to be spiritually mature, we need to embrace disillusionment. And, in embracing his disillusionment, Jonah learns something new about God and his relationship with the Ninevites. In verse 11, right at the end, God says: *'But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?'* Although Jonah struggles to understand God's grace and mercy, he is called to trust. To trust in that which he does not understand, the final lesson we learn from this great passage. Yes, he knows that God is gracious and compassionate: *'...is this not what I said when was still at home?'* he states, but he doesn't understand why. And there's lots we don't understand about God too, that we simply have to park away in our internal pending file. For trust is about clinging to God when we don't have the answers, but are determined to trust him anyway. And I know, through speaking to many of you these last three years, that there's much evidence of this being true among you.

The book of Jonah ends in the same way it begins, with a vision of our passionate God. But, over these last few weeks, we've also seen how merciful, persistent and incredibly gracious he is too. In the last verse of the book of Jonah, we see a God who is stirred and moved. A God who is weeping, a God who cares as he looks on the ignorance of Nineveh, not dissimilar to the picture of Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem in the New Testament. Though the book is named after him, Jonah doesn't have the last word. There's another twist. We don't know how the story ends. We don't know how Jonah

responds. Did he overcome his anger, his disappointment, his disillusionment? Did he finally trust God? We're not told.

But, if Jonah doesn't have the last word, neither does God. Is it not the case that the story continues even now, not only to intrigue but to challenge God's people? In his graciousness, the Lord leaves the last word for all of us who share some affinity with him. '*Should I not be concerned about that great city?*' he asks. How would *you* respond? What would *you* say or do? About this and a lot of other world issues? What would your answer be?