

Turning around

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20

If I were to ask you what you knew about the Book of Jonah, the overwhelming response would be, "He was swallowed by a whale." Usually followed up by how that was physically unlikely and capped off with the devastating fact that there are no whales in the Mediterranean Sea. Which in fact is not true as there are up to ten different species of whale living in that sea, from very small to the quite large.

The Book of Jonah is not serious history, nor a tract about marine biology. It is a parable that challenges us to think about God, and think about ourselves, and wonder about the nature of turning around and changing our minds, or, to use the slightly old fashion word, repenting. To repent means to feel remorse for something; to be regretful about something; to feel sorry about something and to make up your mind to do the right thing, and to turn around. There is playfulness in the story of Jonah, but at the heart there is a serious point. Why, in this season of Epiphany, when we've thought of God being revealed to the wise men on their journey to Bethlehem; and God being revealed to the boy Samuel who eventually hears and recognised Who is calling Him; why do we get this Jonah story. It is because something is revealed about Jonah, who disobeyed God's first call to do something, but eventually turned around and does what God asked. It is because something is revealed about the people of the great city of Nineveh who, when they were told in a one sentence sermon, which doesn't mention God, about the pending destruction of their city, turned around to avert God's destruction.

And finally it reveals something about God, Who changed His mind about destroying the city, because the people changed their ways. Jonah turned around; the people of Nineveh turn around; God turned around.

Remember, it's a parable, a story with a meaning, not a literal history. It shows possibilities and ideas, and different routes to seeing different ways God is revealed. It is not a divine tramline that goes, and only goes, from A to B. We are invited to think about the change in Jonah, and the change in the people of Nineveh, and the change in how God is to be thought about.

Jonah had been resistant to doing what God wanted, but God persisted with this reluctant prophet until at last, with bad grace, Jonah did what God wanted, preached to Nineveh, awaits its destruction, it doesn't come because the people repented, goes in the huff and wants to die. God intervenes again and shows if Jonah could bear to turn his narrowed eyes, let alone his hard heart, how much better the world is when people turn around to change their ways, and find there is a God waiting to love and embrace them back into new life and new hope.

The people of Nineveh had been resistant, doing their own thing without thought to anyone else, until they heard Jonah talk about their doom and, not knowing where it might come from, turned around and changed their ways. Nineveh was a religious city but had attempted to bring their gods to their own use. Jonah entered the city to subvert their complacent religion. He didn't tell them they were evil or wicked, but simply called into question their future. They had forty days.

The number forty is a stock bible word that has hope at its core. Forty days is a period of testing reality in life, examining the truth, looking for authenticity. The people of Nineveh found themselves asking, is this a real life, or just a cheap imitation. Am I simply doing my own thing to please myself, or am I letting God in to shape and guide me? Forty days, Nineveh. Like forty days in Noah's Ark. Or the forty years wandering in the desert for the Israelites. Or the forty days the

prophet Elijah was on the run because he dared challenge the political and religious status quo. Or the forty days of Jesus' temptation which we mark with the Christian season of Lent. Or the forty days of Jesus' resurrection appearances after Easter. Whenever we read the number forty, we are meant to work out where God is at work, and what needs to happen, and turn around, and change, and begin in a new way.ⁱ

In Nineveh the forty days worked. The people heard Jonah's message and, much to Jonah's later annoyance, turned around and repented and reconnected with what really mattered, and with God. Change was possible because they turned around.

And then there is God. Does God shift and change in this story? What do we do with a God Who changes His mind? God saw the change of heart in the people of Nineveh who had turned around, and turned away from thoughts of destruction, "and did not do it."

Is it the case that, beyond the parable, having thought about it what the writer of the Book of Jonah has been exploring with us is helping us to realise that God is always on the move, and that how God expresses His love and mercy may change, but the truly unchanging part about God is His unfailing, forgiving love for His people. Our view changes, because God is so big we cannot take Him all in at the one time.

Sometimes God will look angry to us, because of the wrong we are doing; and sometimes God will look sad to us, because of the hurt we cause ourselves and others; and sometimes God will appear distant from us, because we are the ones who have gone away; and sometimes God will sound silent to us, because we are making too much noise and are not listening; and sometimes God will appear merciful to us, because we have seen the error of our ways and made amends; and sometimes God will appear caring to us, because there is a need of the healing God brings; and sometimes God will appear loving to us, because God can't bear our loneliness and weakness

and confusion and helplessness and comes right up close because that is what we need. God gets involved, revealing Himself in different ways, and depending where we are standing and looking and listening, that's how God we understand God at that particular time. If we move even a little, God will look slightly, or enormously, different. If we turn around, we catch God moving, and see God in a whole new light. Every time.

It sits uncomfortably with us, when we want our faith stories to be unequivocal, and not have multiple interpretations. When we want an immutable God who does precisely what we want and expect God to do. That's the deal, isn't it? Well, no, it's not the deal. That would diminish God. That would immobilise God. That would tie God's hands. That would attempt to control God. One of my favourite religious books is by J B Phillips. It's called, 'Your God is too small.' Written in 1961 it goes through all the ways humans try to diminish, control, direct God. And when God doesn't live up to what they want, or do what they expect, they drop Him. Phillips says, "The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs. While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static." Our ideas of God are stuck in what we were taught in Sunday School which was ok when we were in Sunday School, but the danger is we are left worshipping or serving, "...a God Who is really too small to command...adult loyalty and co-operation."ⁱⁱ

I'd rather have a God Who is supple, and flexible, and dynamic and huge. Not tucked in my pocket, one stuck to the ground, or nailed to a cross. I'd rather have a God who is big enough to account for life, big enough to fit in with the scientific age, big enough to command high admiration and respect because this God has something to say about the appalling vacuity of much contemporary

politics, and the heartless indifference of many modern business practices. A God Who is about turning around.

Did we see a turning around in Fujitsu who talked about letting society and post masters and mistresses down because of the Post Office computer system scandal? Will we see a turning around of politicians in Westminster and Holyrood this election year, whose vanishing WhatsApp messages, and goodness knows what else, have exposed the questionable claims about the transparency of governance? Of course, you can say you've nothing to hide when you've deleted any potential evidence!

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee He told the good news of God, and for people to repent, to feel sorry about something, to change their ways, and to turn around. People did. Named ones like Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John. And Martha and Mary, and Mary Magdalene and Bartimaeus. And unnamed ones like the woman at the well, and the demon-possessed man who looked after pigs, parents with sick children, and lepers and people with untouchable diseases. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel." And they turned around, and they followed Him. Like the people of Nineveh, like Jonah.

Maybe somewhere in your life there is a wrong direction, yours, or someone you love. Maybe there's someone calling to you and pointing a different way. Maybe it is this supple, flexible, dynamic God, Who is far bigger than anything you can fully imagine. And maybe this God is calling to you, today, to see what He is like, to listen to what He has to say, and for you to begin, ever so slowly, to turn around. And follow Him.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Eugene H Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, pps 142-144

ⁱⁱ J B Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*, p7