

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
(Mark 1: 14-20)

Introduction

I don't know if you have ever been asked to do something that you really didn't want to do? So much so that you went to extreme lengths to avoid it. I know often as a child I was heard to say, "Oh Mum! Do I have to?". There have also been times when I have been tempted to invent alibies to stop me having to do something I'm not keen on. But somehow often I end up doing it anyway.

If you identify with this you will feel sympathy for Jonah the subject of today's Bible Reading

The word of the Lord came to Jonah v1.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."

God spoke to Jonah, he had purposes to fulfill and he wanted Jonah to be involved so he spoke to him.

God speaks to us. He wants to use us in his purposes so he speaks to us telling us what he wants to do. We need to be expecting it, listening for it and ready to respond.

But Jonah ran away. V2.

*But **Jonah** set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. ...*

He didn't like what he heard and ran from God. In Chapter 4:2 he explains his reasons

"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.

Jonah wasn't keen on preaching repentance to the people of Ninevah. In his eyes they were sinful and to be scorned. He

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didn't want anything to do with them – and he particularly didn't want God to show mercy to them. If they responded to his prophecy and repented then God would not punish the people, his preaching wouldn't come true – and he would look foolish.

So he ran as far as he possibly could 3,000 miles in the opposite direction. from Ninevah in Assyria (today's Iraq) to Tarshih on the west coast of Spain.

This is something we often do. If we don't like what God is telling us to do, if he gets too close and threatens our lifestyle, our priorities or our security we run from him. We distance ourselves from him and the things he wants us to do. We try to put our fingers in our ears and hum so we don't hear him. This is partly because we live to order our own lives, to make our own decisions and to be in control. It is also because obeying God may feel risky,; it can disturb our comfort and it can challenge us to change or to do something out of our comfort zone

But God is not content to let us go. V4

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶ The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

⁷ The sailors^[a] said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" ⁹ "I am a Hebrew,"

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he replied. "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." ¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

God loves us too much to leave us as we are, to let us escape. He wants to use us and to change us to make us as he intended us to be, working with him and pleasing to him.

When we run away life can get very rocky. If we are outside God's purposes it can be very stormy and difficult. This is because God is determined to hang onto us and he will do what ever it takes to bring us to our senses. With Jonah this was very extreme. The storm was so bad that the sailors feared for their lives. They threw ballast over board. – Jonah's only solution was to give up running "throw me over board" he said. Jonah didn't expect to be rescued he simply acknowledged that God was punishing him for his disobedience and he was ready to accept that punishment - he didn't want to endanger the lives of the other people on the ship.

God is merciful v17 The Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah.

¹⁷ ^[b] *But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

Why a fish? why not piece of wood, man in a boat, life raft? ~ There was symbolism here. One of the gods worshiped in Ninevah was Dagon the fish God. It wasn't a whale as the story goes but another type of fish that was able to swallow other fish far larger than itself.

Jonah repented and turned back to God. In chapter 2 we are told that Jonah called out to God from the depths of the fish's belly and in verse 10 we read

¹⁰ *Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land*

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Whenever we turn back to God he responds immediately. Jonah knew that God would call him again to go to Ninevah – and this time he obeyed. He knew that God’s hand was on his life calling him, leading him and wanting to use him to rescue others. God wanted Jonah to preach the Good News of hope and restoration to a people who were totally lost in sin and ignorance. And the wonderful thing is that when God calls us to work for him he gives us the strength, the gifting and the courage to do it.

Jonah didn’t know what he was going to say to the people but when he got there God gave him the words to speak and because they were God’s words they had an impact. They resonated with the people. The people heard what God said and took it seriously and responded. They turned away from their sin, from the worship of false Gods and they turned to God.

We read: ¹⁰ *When God saw what they 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.*

Which of course was what Jonah had feared – so like the wise, sensible, holy man he was he went out of the city – and sulked. And God spoke to him through a plant that grew up and gave him shade and then as quickly perished.

God said to Jonah:

¹⁰ *Then 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. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left,*

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God speaks to us. He wants to use us in his purposes so he speaks to us telling us what he wants to do. We have the choice to follow him..... or to run away!