

## Sermon

Jonah 4

We think we know people, including people we have never met. We “know” them through the media, through newspaper and television reports, through celebrity magazines and websites. I take a perverse pride in not recognising the names or faces of those who appear on *I’m a Celebrity, get me Out of Here*. Often I only recognise the celebrity partner in *Strictly Come Dancing* by virtue of the face that they are the one can’t dance. All the same, that says as much about my disconnection from some aspects of popular culture than it does about them and a quick look through *OK* and *Hello* as I wait for the my takeaway or for the dentist to see doesn’t same to make up for my deficit of knowledge in this area of life.

The worst, though, is when someone you think you know from a distance fails to live down to your expectations. Take the case of Peter Palumbo. Lord Palumbo is a life peer. He was educated at Eton and Oxford and at one time was a polo team mate and friend of Prince Charles. He made his millions as a property developer, was Chairman of the Arts Council and a political associate of the Conservative Party. You can see evidence of this in the photographs of Lord Palumbo in the company of Margaret Thatcher and John Major that adorn the house he owns in Pennsylvania, Kentuck Knob. This is a house he bought, designed by the architect, Frank Lloyd Wright and open to the public for tours at certain parts of the year. In 2001, along with my brother, wife and son we went on the tour of the house. The guide had ushered our group in, locked the door and begun her introductory talk when a

latecomer arrived. She decided to unlock the door when she realised that this was the owner of the house.

Now, I have not been to Eton. Prince Charles' private number is not in my diary nor mine in his and I've never played polo. I don't move in circles populated by multi-millionaires and I am not, much to your shock I am sure, an instinctive voter for the Conservative Party. This was my first face-to-face meeting with a multi-millionaire, property-developer friend of royalty and Margaret Thatcher. What a charming, lovely man he was, introducing himself by name and shaking hands with each member of the visiting group; genuinely interested in what we thought of the house and particularly wanting our response to one or two art works he had recently purchased and placed in it. My simplistic views concerning multi-millionaire property developer, royalist Tories have never quite been the same again as a result of this meeting.

It's bad enough when political and social figures decline to live down to your low opinion of them but what happens when it is God who does this to you? Take the case of Jonah, God and the city of Nineveh. The verse that precedes chapter four informs us, "When God saw how they [the people of Nineveh] gave up their wicked ways, he relented and did not inflict on them the punishment he had threatened." (3: 10) We are then told, "This greatly displeased Jonah." (4: 1) Am I the only to get the feeling that there is a bit of understatement in those words? Jonah is looking forward to large-scale punishment from God on the people of Nineveh. Either he does not

think they will repent of their wrongdoing or he feels that they've missed their chance long ago and nothing they do will make any difference to a divine determination to visit suffering upon them. Lying behind either of these thoughts is an understanding of who God is and what sort of God God is.

Not that Jonah's view of God is unique. It's not only Jonah who works on the basis that God is some sort of grumpy old man who delights in discovering human misdemeanours – both minor and major – and then punishing them, often in ways we perceive to be out of proportion to the magnitude of the original offence. Who among us has not heard that frightening phrase, 'the God of the Old Testament' and then read or avoiding reading the Old testament on the basis that it is the property of some nasty deity, in contrast to the warm, fuzzy, forgiving God who occupies the pages of the New Testament? Well, much to the surprise and annoyance of Jonah (and possibly ourselves) God fails to live down to this stereotype and turns up in forgiving form in the final chapter of this Old Testament book. How should we respond?

Jonah responds with anger; Jonah responds by trying to re-write reality; Jonah responds – surprise, surprise – by running away. In **anger** Jonah prays to God and tries to re-write the story, casting himself in the best possible light. I just knew it God. You're always going around inappropriately forgiving people. It's not fear of the people of Nineveh that made me run away from your command. Oh no, it was because I knew that you were that bad, bad thing, "a gracious and compassionate

God, long suffering, ever constant, always ready to relent and not inflict punishment.” (4: 3) Would that all ‘gods’ were this bad to people as this God is to the people of Nineveh, insisting on being forgiving to them when they repent of their wrongdoing. Then Jonah, having tried to convince God that he ran away for the best of reasons does exactly the same, running away from the city to sit and have a good old-fashioned sulk because God has failed to work things out the way Jonah would have preferred.

Jonah is in good biblical company here. He could have featured in some of the parables Jesus told. Think of the older brother in the story of the prodigal son. How dare his father forgive this wastrel, despite the fact that he has repented of his actions and come home, seeking forgiveness. Jonah would have fitted in well with those vineyard workers, protesting when the owner is generous, paying a full day’s wages to workers that he has hired later in the day. Jonah would have been in good company with religious leaders, trying to protect institutions and tradition against the new fangled ideas of this Jesus from Nazareth, with his ideas that might sideline the Temple and a whole system of religious interpretation. God, they all think, surely does not work in this sort of way.

And what about us? How do we think God works? We, of course, come along thousands of years after the story of Jonah was first told and written down. We live in world after Jesus. If we have grown up in cultures affected by the Christian story and faith we take for granted that God is in some way forgiving, even if at the same

time we harbour some idea that God punishes wrong-doers and rewards the just, just like we would do if we were God. Well, every so often God speaks to us and reminds us that things – God – simply are not that simple. Here in Brentwood, in the company of others from Brentwood Methodist Church, we in the URC have been taking part in *The Big Read*. We have been reading our way through Matthew's Gospel during Lent, a chapter or so a day and then meeting weekly in groups to discuss what has struck us about the previous days' reading and the passage for the day. Over the past couple of weeks, hearing Matthew's distinctive voice in the telling of the Jesus story, we have been challenged about our lazy views concerning the **New Testament** God.

Apart from Jesus' parable about those vineyard workers we have heard stories of judgment and violence, upon murderous tenants, upon scribes and Pharisees, upon half hearted servants; and about the division of the righteous and unrighteous, on the basis of what they did and did not do (not upon what they intellectually believed) into sheep and goats; some to go to reward, some to eternal punishment. This has been a bit of a shock to me; to be reminded of this perspective on God in a Gospel in the New Testament. It's not only Jonah who has to be constantly checking and re-evaluating the way in which he understands God: it's me too. I suppose that's why I find the ending of the Book of Jonah so appropriate. It ends with a question mark: "And should not I [God] be sorry about the great city of Nineveh, with its hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, as well as cattle without number?"

We've reached the end of the journey as far as the Book of Jonah is concerned and not everything is resolved. Jonah is sitting under insufficient shelter of his own choosing and making, preferring to die rather than accept that God knows better than him what to do with sinners like him. Those of us who like a happy ending may choose to mentally complete the tale by reconciling Jonah to God. Jonah recognises that God knows best, gets up and goes into town to celebrate with his fellow-forgiven-folks in Nineveh. Human nature being what it is, it might not work out that way. Perhaps like an elder brother he'll prefer not to come into the welcome party or he'll just want to go on complaining that other workers got treated generously. What we know, however, is that Jonah's story is part of a bigger story and Jonah's story helps us to understand that story.

People, human beings, humanity think that they know better than God but God knows them better than they know themselves. God, shown intervening in the story of Jonah has intervened in the world in Jesus. In doing so God upsets our deeply held views of right and wrong, fairness and unfairness; offering forgiveness to everyone, no matter what they have done. Our role is to complete Jonah's story for ourselves, to answer God's question about forgiveness with a 'yes'. Yes, God, no matter how well or how little we understand you. No matter how well or how badly we view or treat others; yes you are sorry for us all; you insist on reconciling us to you; you insist on writing your happy ending to our story and the story of the world.