

Sermon
Jonah Chapter One

Perhaps there is a prophet somewhere else in the Old Testament who is more determined not to do what God tells them than Jonah was, but if there is I don't know who it would be. True, Moses had all sorts of excuses to offer the Lord as to why he should not go back to Egypt but accepted his task. True, the prophet Elijah at one point in his career ran away to hide in the wilderness but then he had been threatened with death by Queen Jezebel. Jonah, on the other hand, simply receives a direct command from God and directly sets about disobeying it. Confronted with the simple divine command, "Go to the great city of Nineveh; go and denounce it" instead Jonah heads for Tarshish. Ordered to march East, Jonah sails West. So, not the very model of the ancient bible prophet and yet, strangely, even by the end of the first chapter of the book whose hero is so flawed, Christian ears that have already heard the gospel stories may well hear echoes of Jesus' story in that of Jonah.

Jonah, like Jesus, is found asleep in the boat in the midst of a storm that threatens to sink it and kill the crew. Jonah, like Jesus, finds himself in a situation where death is close and lots are being cast by those who have them in their power. Jonah, like Jesus is offered up to death with the understanding that somehow his death will bring a divine response that allows others to live. Jesus calmed the sea with a word, Jonah orders the crew to throw him over the side: "Pick me up and throw me overboard;

then the sea will go down.” And then finally, just at the end of the first chapter, along comes the big fish, sent by God, and Jonah is swallowed up, to remain in its belly for three days and three nights. Jesus himself, in Matthew’s Gospel, can’t resist using this as the basis of his own denunciation; this time of a generation, rather than of the city of Nineveh: “It is a wicked, godless generation that asks for a sign, and the only sign that will be given is the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah was in the sea monster’s belly for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be three days and nights in the bowels of the earth.” (12: 39, 40)

Usually I would be tempted to say that things are different for us. Jonah’s command from God is clear as anything can be. Jonah hears it clearly; no sense that he misunderstood or that his map reading abilities were particularly sub-standard. Yet it just doesn’t seem that way for us, at least most of the time. I wonder what one is meant to understand by the opening words in the book of Jonah: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: ‘Go the great city of Nineveh and denounce it, for I am confronted by its wickedness.’” Are we supposed to believe that Jonah heard a voice out of the air, a voice that would have also been audible to others had they been standing beside him? If so, his disobedience, his desire to ‘escape from the Lord’, as the book puts it, seems both worse and yet at the same time less easy to understand. After all, if you literally hear God’s voice commanding you to an action it seems perverse to attempt the opposite.

I'm prepared to believe that people do have auditory experiences that are not just voices from within that require better medication but actual communications from God. On the other hand I'm pretty convinced that on the vast, vast majority of occasions that is **not** how God communicates with us. The good news then is that people in our society need not think we Christians are all "loonies" because we are forever going around claiming to hear the voice of God. The less good news is that it can take some hard work to figure out what it is that God is actually telling us to do in the here and now whilst, frustratingly, God is pictured in Jonah (and elsewhere in the Bible) as being much more clearly spoken. Personally, I have on occasion had day-dreams; internal visual experiences that I am convinced have been cases of God speaking clearly and directly to me. On the other hand, most of the time God seems to leave it me to figure out for myself the content of the divine message of the day.

I think this is important. We, the Church, need to try to understand what God wants us to do today, not so much because we fear some twenty-first century version of the big fish will come along to swallow us up if we head off in the wrong direction, but because we believe it will be pleasing to God and ultimately benefit us because as we work to think the right thoughts and take the right actions we become more and more conformed to the sort of people God wants us to be and we grow more reconciled with

our Creator. For us, most of the time, the process will not be a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to an audible, direct divine command. Instead, we have to try to figure it out, using our knowledge of the Bible and our experience of the world about us; pondering the situations as individuals and sharing our thoughts and feelings together as a Church; trying different things out to see if they fit the current scene. What I would like to do is share a couple of thoughts with you and leave it to you to say what you think as a result of what I have to say this evening.

Yesterday, along with some who are also present at this service, I was at a meeting in Basildon of our South East Essex Area Partnership, formed by the URC congregations here in Brentwood and those in Billericay, Ingatestone, Grays, Basildon, Hutton and Wickford. It was not the most exciting meeting that I have ever attended, though we did talk about evangelism. Evangelism is the theme for the United Reformed Church’s *Vision4life* process this year and in our discussion of that theme it was said, as it is often said, that we need to learn how to make contacts as a Church. Even as that was being said I could hear another voice, one that I had heard a number of months previously, saying something rather different. It was saying, “I’m tired of hearing that we should make contacts with people outside the church. We have hundreds of them already. The real challenge is to get them interested in the church.”

That comment was made in an Elders Meeting in one particular congregation but could have been said with equal truth in any of the three congregations in this pastorate and, I suspect, be said about almost any church currently in existence. As churches we all have family, friends, neighbours, building users and visitors to worship. We don't have to travel as far as Nineveh to meet these people or as far away as Tarshish in order to ignore them they are on our own doorstep and sometimes they are in our very homes. Like Jonah, however, we are afraid; not of death as he was if he insulted the Ninevehites but of rejection, mockery and failure. The problem is, as I see it, that God is not offering an alternative to sharing our experience of the good news that is ours through knowing God in Jesus Christ. The United Reformed Church as a denomination has for some time been very reluctant to get involved in anything that looks like evangelism – good news sharing – and has for some time been reducing in membership at a potentially catastrophic rate – our equivalent of the big fish swallowing us up? I wonder.

On the other hand, as well as the shift in our denomination's thinking and approach there are examples in the life of the congregations in this pastorate that I think are signs of hope. Here in Brentwood we have drawn people in to monthly worship on a Wednesday and we are looking to involve other in a shawl ministry. In Billericay we have commenced road-testing *Emmaus*, a Christian nurture course that we might then offer to all

of those contacts that we, like any church, possess. In Ingatestone we have built relationships with parents and toddlers through running a Tuesday afternoon group to the point where we have now run three family-friendly services, all of which have attracted a number of families, several as repeat-worshippers. I do believe that God is calling us to talk to all those people we are in contact with about our experience of Christ and of the Church, encouraging them to own it for themselves: the biblical tradition, a new spirit in our denomination, experience of response at a congregational level and an amount of gut instinct tell me that this is so. If I'm right, the question then becomes one of how we respond to what God is saying; doing what we are told or doing what Jonah did – and as for the latter, well we'll hear more about that next month. For now, listen to this instead and see what it says to you. [Play the music]