

## Wheatley United Reformed Church

Sunday 21 September 2014

Jonah 3.10-4.11; Psalm 145.1-8; Phil.1.21-20; Matt.20.1-16

The Bible is not exactly awash with comedy, or if it is, we miss it. But there is one wonderful exception, the Book of Jonah, which Harold Bloom, the great American literary critic, recently described as ‘a sly masterpiece of four brief chapters’. He writes: ‘Jonah’s book is magnificent literature because it is so funny. Irony, even in Jonathan Swift, could not be more brilliant. Jonah himself is a sulking, unwilling prophet, cowardly and petulant. There is no reason why an authentic prophet should be likable: Elijah and Elisha are savage, Jeremiah is a bipolar depressive, Ezekiel a madman.’ Well, there’s something to think about.

But Jonah isn’t really a book of prophecy like Amos or Isaiah (by the way, Amos was an agricultural labourer, while Isaiah was an aristocrat). It hardly belongs where it sits between Obadiah and Micah, if you can even find it on that thin bible paper. Bloom, who is himself Jewish, thinks it should be with what the Hebrew Bible calls the Writings, like Job and Ecclesiastes. It’s surely more of a theological short story with strong folk tale elements about it. Bloom continues: ‘Nobody comes out looking very impressive from the book of Jonah, whether God, Jonah, the ship captain and his men, or the king of Nineveh and his people. Even the gourd sheltering Jonah from the sun comes to a bad end. There is of course the giant fish (not, alas, a whale) who swallows up Jonah for three days but then disgorges him at God’s command. No Moby Dick, he inspires neither fear nor awe.’

The extraordinary thing is that this comic masterpiece is read in synagogues on the most solemn of all days in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, prompting me to wonder if humour does not have its own proper place as a teacher of the way of faith. There’s actually a long tradition which suggests that it may, stretching all the way back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle and given prominence in the Middle Ages by its greatest theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, whose work is certainly not a laugh a minute. According to this tradition, the importance of leisure and relaxation should not be underestimated; they have their own moral and spiritual value. One of the early monastic writers, St John Cassian, who lived between the fourth and fifth centuries, told a tale which is often repeated in later European literature. Someone was shocked one day to see St John the Evangelist playing a

game with his disciples. St John called over one of the young men, who had a bow in his hand, and asked him to shoot it. When he had done so, St John asked him if he could keep doing this. The young man replied that if he did, the bow would break, whereupon the saint pointed out that so too would the human spirit snap, were it never unbent. The great Spanish writer Cervantes, who died on the same day as Shakespeare four hundred years ago next year, echoed this when he wrote about the entertainment value of his collection of short stories in the preface: you can't spend all your time at prayer or at work; there are times for recreation, when the careworn spirit can rest. I doubt this wise tradition is any less relevant now.

The point such writers were trying to make is that we can wear ourselves out with what for want of a more convenient shorthand we may call religion, just as we can with work, and that time off for more light-hearted activities is necessary if we are to flourish. That, of course, is exactly what the Sabbath was for; but it got turned into rules and regulations which Jesus deliberately flouted, and then into more rules and regulations by some of our Victorian forebears, as many of us well remember from our childhood. Leisure is not only a moral good, it is necessary for us, to lighten the load and the spirit so that we can return to our duties refreshed; and the joy of a comic tale like Jonah is that it can teach us while making us smile.

Have you ever felt like running away from this whole religious thing and getting on as most people seem happy to do without bothering with it? Then Jonah is a book for you, because that's exactly how Jonah first responds to the unwanted call from God to go to preach to the inhabitants of a great pagan city. Do you ever feel that when you try to do what you're supposed to, no one notices or even says thank you? That's how Jonah felt about God. Have you ever felt sorry for yourself because some little thing hasn't worked out as you wanted it to, and you become so taken up in your own self-pity that you lose all sense of proportion? I have, often enough. So Jonah is certainly a book for me.

Somehow it's got into our minds that if it's in the Bible it must all be taken with deadly seriousness; as if all its books operated on the same level. Perhaps it doesn't occur to us that the word of God can reach us through irony and humour. Jonah may not be rip-roaring comedy but it has such a good take on our human frailties that I can't help smiling. First, Jonah gets on the first ship he can in the opposite direction

so that he can escape from the presence of the Lord. Tarshish is the Hebrew name for Spain, which means he makes not for Iraq but for the western Mediterranean, which also represents the limits of the known world and a place where Yahweh is apparently not known. Then it all goes badly wrong. When the storm hits the ship, Jonah gets blamed for it, because he's blabbed about the reason for his voyage. To his credit, he offers himself up as a sacrificial victim. At first the heathen sailors try to avoid such drastic action, but when they finally throw him into the raging sea it is they who pray to Jonah's God, whom he, of course, has forsaken, not to hold it against them. To their great relief, it works. The storm ceases and the sailors get religion in a bad way, offering non-human sacrifices and making vows, the nature of which is not recorded. Notice that it is God who sends the fish to swallow Jonah and eventually bring him to safety. But while he's inside it, Jonah also and understandably gets a bad dose of religion and starts to pray, using the only words he can think of, some rather mangled quotations of verses from the Psalms (OK, you only get the humour if you know the originals). The prayer itself is odd because it speaks of what has not yet happened, of being rescued from death, while Jonah accuses God of casting him off from his presence, when it is Jonah who has done the running away. But it works, because the fish vomits Jonah up goodness knows on what shore, only for God to repeat his command to go to Nineveh. The fish which seemed to be carrying Jonah to his doom has in fact been the means of his deliverance.

Nor does it go according to plan when he gets there and says his piece. Uniquely among the prophets, he is believed. Bipolar Jeremiah and Ezekiel the madman weren't believed. It's what you expect when you are a prophet. Not only do they people of Nineveh believe Jonah, they too get religion so badly that they even dress their animals up in sackcloth and ashes. Talk of overreaction! But – and here is the first hint of the underlying theology – the people of Nineveh do what the people of Israel always fail to do – they believe and they repent, and calamity is averted; at least for now. If they can do it, the author seems to be suggesting, why is it that God's chosen people resist his call so strongly? In the end it's not the heathen who can't tell their right from their left, it's by implication the book's readers, who despite having all the guidance of the Law and the Prophets, belong to a nation which has lost its moral

and spiritual compass. But the nice thing is that the message isn't hammered home with the full force of prophetic denunciation. It insinuates itself into the text and you have to follow the many ironies of the story to hear its echoes. What remains at the end, Harold Bloom observes, is Yahweh's playfully rhetorical question, which sounds so much better and funnier in the Authorized Version: 'And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?' He concludes: 'Presumably the cattle ("beasts" in the Hebrew) are able to tell one direction from another, unlike the citizens of Nineveh, Jerusalem, or New York City'; to which we might add our own towns and cities. And how refreshing that the book ends not with an answer but with a question dangling in the air, inviting us to think about it.

Look deeper, and hints and patterns in the story-telling begin to emerge. Jonah flees from Yahweh's presence in a series of descents: he goes down to Joppa, descends into the hold of the ship, is thrown into the sea, is swallowed up in the belly of a great fish, goes down to the roots of the mountains, to the belly of Sheol, the underworld itself. So his flight from God is associated with a journey to death, whereas Jonah imagines he will find security and safety as he sets off for Spain, in his deep sleep in the hold of the ship, and when he leaves Nineveh and makes a booth for himself to watch its fate, then sits under the shade of the gourd. Is there a connection between that booth and the Jewish feast of tabernacles or booths, when the children of Israel live in booths outside for a week to remind them that God brought them out of Egypt? Is there another between the three days and nights Jonah spends in the belly of the fish and the three days it takes to walk across the city? These are puzzles offered for us to reflect on. One thing is certain, though: all Jonah's attempts to protect and cocoon himself from what is going on around him end in failure. Nothing in the story turns out quite as conventional religious beliefs would assume: Jonah ends up exactly where he didn't want to be; the monster fish becomes his means of salvation; and a pagan city also finds deliverance when Yahweh changes his mind. As another critic writes: 'Jonah flees his divine commission, and the entire crew ends up worshipping YHWH. He speaks five words in Nineveh, and the whole city instantly turns away from its "evil".'

Jonah feels foolish and aggrieved because his message worked; and Yahweh asks him and us a question which provokes many others: will Nineveh be the object of his wrath at some point in the future (it will)? And why does he show compassion on this occasion and not on so many others, when people cry out to him?

And maybe that's its gift to us: its ironies and its messiness; its unflattering portrayal of a variety of humans; its reversal of all expectations, and its seemingly capricious God. If it wasn't there we would have lost from the Bible a book which is quite unlike any other; one which isn't afraid to poke a bit of fun at our human frailties and even at divine inconsistency. After all, it goes against any orthodox view of an eternal and unchanging Creator that he should change his mind. Perhaps the author is remembering how in Genesis 5, just before the Flood, Yahweh repented that he had made the human race at all, so wicked had they become. You can't be much of an omniscient, omnipotent God if you do something then regret it because it turns out differently from what you had hoped. That sounds much more like us.

You can't read this book in a straight line, you have to follow its twists and turns. You shouldn't read it with too straight a face, because it is quite subversive. You don't need to wonder if there ever was a real Jonah who was swallowed by a fish. That's Mediterranean folklore, like the classical myth of the musician Arion, who was thrown overboard by sailors who robbed him and whose music charmed a dolphin so much that it gave him a ride to the shore. Just enjoy it, let its sly charm ask you questions, about yourself, about the life of faith, about God. Don't expect simple answers. We don't live in a black-and-white world but one which is full of many shades and colours. We don't live in a predictable world, but one full of inconsistencies and uncertainties. But we do live in a world in which those who have run away from the divine presence can end up feeling very sorry for themselves, and in which with that playful question in the mind, about any city or society, teases us into reflection; even prayer: 'And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?'

*. [Quotations from Harold Bloom's The Shadow of a Great Rock: A Literary Appreciation of the King James Bible, published September 2011.](#)*

Also James S. Ackerman, 'Jonah' in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987)