

## Jonah 4 Sermon for 11am

We have finally reached the denouement of the story of Jonah. We've had storms, great fish and repentant animals, and then this week we have quick-growing plants and ravenous worms. It's been a great ride!

Today we have some of our questions answered, Jonah is asked some questions and also, we are left with the ultimate question of the whole story, asked by God himself. So today is about questions and answers.

The first answer we have is to the question we noted in chapter 1. Why doesn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh in the first place? Perhaps it was because he was scared about going to an enemy of Israel and telling them they were going to be judged. Maybe he ran away out of fear of what would happen to him. We've had plenty of times in this story that Jonah was ready to throw his life away, so this seems unlikely. Finally we have Jonah confirm today that the real reason for his disobedience and his running away from God was something very different. The real reason was that Jonah had an inkling that Nineveh was ripe for change and that didn't fit with the vengeance that Jonah believed should be meted out to the enemies of God's people.

Jonah prays angrily to God, throwing back in his face the amazing qualities that God has shown. He'd rather die than see his enemies, the subjects of his hatred, receive the same love, mercy and grace from God that he has received! Jonah is bitter, demanding justice as he sees it, unwilling to live in a world where the justice that he would like to see is withheld and the love that he would hold back flows freely to a foreign enemy. Here we have the answer to why Jonah ran away. It wasn't fear. It wasn't that he had misunderstood God. It was that he understood God well enough to dislike what was going to happen, and so he would rather have been dead or run away than been part of it.

God answers his rant with a short question – "Is it right for you to be angry?" Like a stereotypical adolescent teenager, Jonah doesn't respond but instead stomps away from God again. Out of the city, he sits and sulks. He still half-hopes that God would see sense and destroy the city and so he watches and waits.

It's easy to laugh at Jonah and hold his attitude at arms-length. For Jonah, though, the Ninevites were murderers and rapists. They were desecrators and destroyers of culture. They were greedy conquerors of land who squeezed the life out of a country for their own gain. And most importantly, they were certainly not God's people. They were idolaters and pagans who deserved destruction. Jonah hated them for their past atrocities. He hated knowing they were still in existence, never mind prospering! He was trained from birth to believe that God loved the Israelites and they were special. God shouldn't extend his mercy, never mind his love to Nineveh!

I wonder whether feelings of hatred, feelings of wanting others to get their just desserts, their comeuppance, and their justice are really that alien to us? Whether it's on a global scale where we have conscious or unconscious prejudice, on a European scale where we find ourselves having strong feelings about the countries in the EU, on a national scale where we are either Brexiteers or Remainers, or on a local and personal level where people have hurt us, been promoted in front of us, hurt our children or our friends, cheated us, or avoided us – we can probably relate to Jonah's flashes of hatred, or malevolent wishes, even if they are only fleeting.

Brexit seems a really good example. The amount of hatred and vitriol which has been thrown around has been astounding. Who are we that we have become so free with our insults, our mocking jibes, and our branding of those we disagree with? What if God isn't finished with our enemies yet? What does that do to our relationships with them?

You might say that it's not that simple. Maybe you're right that the issues are complex and historical. But, we appear to have depersonalised and generalised and then made enemies of whichever side we disagree with. Jonah didn't go and meet the Ninevites and try to understand their complex culture. He just lumped them all together as Israel's historic enemies – men, women, children, slaves and free – and sought their destruction by refusing to be God's mouthpiece of mercy and love. Jonah didn't try to destroy them himself. He was just totally outraged at the idea that God might save them, forgive them, and even love them. You can argue that the Ninevites repented of their folly; but that was after God had sent Jonah to save them, not before. Jonah knew that they'd respond and he hated them for it even more.

God loves Remainers. God loves Brexiteers. God loves Brits and Europeans. God loves those people who have hurt us and those we love. God loves those who plan to subject us to terrorism. God loves prisoners. This kind of love is unnatural for us. I heard a joke the other day which was perhaps in bad taste, but it serves my purpose here so forgive me. Someone was asked what it would take to unite our country. The answer – a Luftwaffe. The responder was trying to be funny, but it's probably got a painful amount of truth in it. We tend to unite well against a common enemy. It's why so much of politics is manoeuvring to make sure we blame the right people, be that the EU, the Americans, or the Brexiteers.

That just isn't how God works in this story or in any story in the Bible. Whether it's Jesus talking to Samaritans or agreeing to pay tax to Rome, or whether it's Jonah being called to be part of God's love to Nineveh. Jonah's story is one where we can unite against an enemy if we like, but God will laugh and use us anyway to show his mercy on our enemies, and then simply ask "Is it right for you to be angry?"

So Jonah sulks and God makes him embody a parable about plants and worms. Jonah did nothing to deserve his shade, just like Jonah did nothing to deserve to have been born in Israel as one of God's chosen people or to have been chosen as a prophet. The law of averages says he could have equally been a Ninevite, but only because of his luck, or God's hand, he now sits judgmentally looking for the destruction of the city. Not recognising this, Jonah wants to die again. He's out of his mind with anger. God asks "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" Jonah is petulant. Of course he has every right to be angry that the good thing he had has been taken from him! It was his bush, his shelter, his security while he sat waiting. He doesn't really try to justify his anger, but just restates it.

We do this as well. Trying to move away from Brexit, though there are good parallels there too; we do this when we are irrationally angry at things being taken from us which we feel we deserve and yet, fundamentally, we have no reason to claim. Whether it's my job, my prosperity, my health, my access to high-speed broadband, my driving licence, my place in a hospital waiting list. These are all things that we think we deserve. But only by a freak of nature were we born here and now, rather than in medieval Japan, or stone-age Italy. Did we earn that? Is that our right? I could go on for ages on this, but maybe just think about it next time you have a flash of anger "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Finally, God's last question takes us to the heart of the whole story. Jonah is upset about the demise of a plant, but not about the demise of 120 thousand people and animals. He rages about a plant,

but hates the survival of the people. He is equally undeserving of either his plant-based comfort, and his place within God's people. So easily could things have been different. The Ninevites, despite their sophisticated culture and record in war, were ignorant, according to God, not knowing their right from their left. Do we think Jonah was any different in this story? It's a learning experience for everyone. The lesson is very simple – God is sovereign over all his creation and loves it dearly. We have so much that we don't deserve, so how can we wish destruction upon other creatures loved by God? The Bible tells us that God loved us so much that he, in Jesus, was destroyed for us so we don't have to be punished for our wrong-doings. What right have we therefore to try to limit God's favour to others, or to wish ill upon others when everything we have – our lives, our dreams, our survival, flourishing and prosperity – are all acts of undeserved grace from God himself.

Brexiters or Remainers, victims or criminals, haters or hurters; we are all undeserving and we all live in debt to the God who made the world and who died for it. Rather than seek the next common enemy to unite against, let's unite for God and God's world in love and mercy; thanking God that he has already shown us the way and all we do is in gratitude for all that Jesus has done for us. Amen.