

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Agreeing and Living in Peace

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**  
**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011**

Jonah 1:1-16

Matthew 21:28-32

Apart from the epistles, nearly all of the Bible which we have, was originally in a verbal form. It was told around camp-fires and home-fires: it was remembered and recited in the fields and while people walked on the roads. This story of Jonah is surely one of those which must have been a favourite, not only in the confines of worship, but in the wider society. Imagine a mother putting her children to bed and asking "What bed-time story do you want tonight?" "Something spooky! Tell us about Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt!" demands one. "No, I like the silly story about Balaam and the talking donkey," says another. But the third says "No, tell us the funny story about Jonah and the big fish and the plant and all. That always makes me laugh." And the others agree, because who doesn't like a good laugh?

So this is how the story goes.

"Once upon a time, in the time of the two Kingdoms, God spoke to Jonah, the son of Amittai and told him to go to Nineveh. He was to speak against the people of Nineveh, because you must know that they were very wicked, and used to treat even their own people harshly, never mind the horrible things they did to their enemies. Of course, they thought that God's people were their enemies. Now Jonah did not like what he was told to do, not one little bit. Maybe he thought that they would tear him apart. Maybe he thought that they would put him in prison. Anyway, he was scared; too scared to do what God had told him to - told him, mind you, not offered it as a possible suggestion of how to spend a few empty days. So Jonah thought that he would run away from God."

And at this point surely one of the children, who would know the story well, would say something like "But that was very silly, wasn't it. Because you can't hide from God: God is everywhere and sees everything."

And the mother might answer, "That's right. And Jonah would have known that too, if he had been thinking straight. But he isn't the first person who has tried to run away from God and hide, and he won't be the last. Remember that.

"Anyway, Jonah went to the great port of Joppa. You can get boats there that go all over the Mediterranean sea, you know, and he chose one that was going to Tarshish, which is, of course, about as far from Joppa as you can sail. He really wanted to put a lot of distance between him and his task in Nineveh. He really wanted to find a way that it would be impossible for him to do what he was told. And, before you say anything: he wasn't the first or the last to try to make up excuses why they shouldn't do what God says.

"He got on the boat and, maybe the sailors asked why he wanted to go such a long way. After all he wouldn't have had much luggage, and he obviously wasn't a rich merchant. So he told them that he was running away from God. Well, they understood that. Or they thought they did. After all they weren't God's people, like us. They were foreigners, with foreign ideas about God. They thought that there were lots of little gods, each one tied to a particular place. It would make sense to them that if you want to run away from the God of Israel, Tarshish should be way outside his range. But they were wrong.

Jonah thought he was all right, but to make sure he went down into the hold of the ship, where it would be even harder for God to see him" - giggles all round at this - "and he went to sleep. Well, he must have been very tired or a very good sleeper, because he didn't seem to notice that almost as soon as the ship left the shore the wind got up and the waves grew rough, and the ship began pitching and tossing, and the timbers were groaning and creaking. The water rushed over the deck and began to drip down through the deck into the hold, making the cargo wet and heavy: heavier than the ship could bear for long.

"Storms at sea happen, of course, but this was the wrong time of year for such a violent storm: more violent and unexpected than anything that the sailors had ever known. They were really frightened, and each one prayed to their own god - but they weren't really gods at all, of course so that did no good. Then they thought that they had better lighten the ship, in case the weight of the wet cargo dragged them down to the depths of the sea bed. Better to lose the cargo - though the owners of it would be very angry - than to lose their own lives.

But nothing worked. The sea still raged and the wind still roared and the boat seemed likely to break up under the power of the water. Then they remembered Jonah. They went and found him and the captain told him to wake up and pray to his god. Maybe his god was the one who might be able to save them.

"And he was right wasn't he?" comes the interruption. But the rest say "Shhh. Go on with the story."

"Anyway, the sailors were not stupid. They knew that this storm was so odd that there must be something behind it. They decided that one of them must have done something wrong and was being punished, but no one could think of anything they had done: or if they had, they weren't admitting to it. So they decided to draw lots as the only way to find out: let the gods show them who was making them angry. And they included Jonah in the draw. And the lot fell to him.

"So now they wanted to know more about him. 'Tell us why this has happened,' they demanded. 'Who are you? What do you do for a living? Where are you from? What nationality are you?'

"And Jonah knew now that he couldn't hide, so he told them the truth. 'I am a Hebrew. I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'

"Well, the sailors were appalled. They had thought that this was the action of some small, local god. But here is Jonah, who has told them he is running away from God, now admitting that the God he is trying to run from is the God of all the earth, of all creation. *They* could understand the enormity of what Jonah had done, all right. *They* knew that you don't disobey a direct order from the God of all creation and expect that he won't notice. 'What do you think you are doing!' they exclaimed. Perhaps it was only now that Jonah realised something of his own stupidity.

"So next they asked him what they should do, and Jonah said they should throw him overboard. Maybe he hoped that they wouldn't do this. After all, he could have simply jumped in himself, but he didn't. And if he hoped that, he was right. Those sailors might have been ignorant about the one true God, but they were decent men, and they didn't want to heave their passenger overboard to certain death. So they tried to row to the shore. But they couldn't. (After all, once he was on the shore, what was to stop Jonah from trying a different way of hiding?)

"But the sea grew more and more stormy, and the ship was going to sink, and what could they do? If the ship went down they would all die - Jonah among them, so - they cried to the one true God to forgive them; they reminded God that he was the one who had sent the storm and driven them to consider this enormity; and then they heaved Jonah over the side. Splash!

"And the sea stopped raging, and the wind dropped and the ship and the sailors were safe. So they offered a sacrifice to the one true God and they made vows to him. Jonah was a very disobedient prophet, but even in his disobedience, God was at work."

And then the children's blankets were tucked around them and they were promised more of the story tomorrow.

It is a funny story, this story of Jonah. We need funny stories in our life, things to make us laugh. It is a story that makes us laugh at Jonah - silly Jonah, who thought he could ignore God and run away and hide - and then leads us to laugh at ourselves. Because we all do similar things. We all treat God's commands as suggestions, and try to find excuses as to why we need not do what he says, why it cannot possibly apply to us. We are all, at times, like the second son in Jesus' story, who says "I will go," but does not. We promise to follow Christ. We ask him to be our saviour, but then we expect to be able to go on just as we did before, just like everyone else does.

Jonah needed outsiders to show him how silly he was. When the sailors realise that Jonah's God is far bigger and more powerful than any of the local deities that they were used to thinking about, they see at once that it is futile to run from him and folly to disobey. How often those outside the church call us to account for not doing what Jesus tells us to. If we say that we follow him, then the world has the right to expect us to show love, not suspicion. It has the right to expect us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, those who would oppose us in our work and worship, and the people and things that we fear - even death itself. Those watching us have the right to expect us to welcome the stranger, to heal the sick, to cast out evil, to trust God to provide and not be greedy and grasping, and to forgive, forgive and forgive, and trust, trust, trust.

I have a friend who's catch-phrase is "You say you're a Christian, then act like one." The Nike catch-phrase is - or was - "just do it" and maybe that should be the Christian watchword as well. Too often we are like children trying to find excuses not to do what their parents tell them, or to do it at the time that suits us, not when it is needed. The silly story of Jonah speaks to us about all that.

But it does more. It is a story of hope. Jonah, who represents us all, is a daft man, who acts in a stupid and faithless way, but when he realises it and changes, then God can use even the silly situation he has brought on himself to show himself to others and bring glory. The sailors do not, as Jonah might expect, say "If that's what a follower of the one true God is like, then that's a god to steer clear of." No. When they see that Jonah is prepared to sacrifice himself for them, when they see that God really is powerful, not only to transform a quivering coward but to save them by calming the storm, then they worship him and, significantly, they make vows.

We will be looking to learn more from the silly story of the reluctant prophet Jonah in the next couple of weeks. But as we think of the first part of the story, perhaps what God would have us remember is just who it is that we say we worship and serve: and then to get on and do it.

Amen