

A fair deal for Jonah

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[0 : 00] Our Heavenly Father, we pray that we may be encouraged and strengthened for today by your word this morning.

In Christ's name, Amen. Well, it's always a great joy to be back here on a Sunday and with the Cornhill students in the weekday.

Thank you for the invitation and your friendship. We have a rather strange theme today, a fair deal for Jonah. So naturally we turn to that book in the Bible.

I won't give you the page number. You are an educated congregation. Jonah chapter 1 verse 3 is my text, or rather just four words in that verse.

So please turn to Jonah chapter 1 verse 3. I am using the NIV. You will have to follow this in your ESV.

[1 : 03] That ought not to be too difficult. Jonah chapter 1 verse 3. But Jonah ran away. Now, Jonah may not be the greatest of the minor prophets, but then the prophets of the 8th century before Christ were a very impressive bunch indeed.

Hosea and Amos, as well as Jonah, challenged the northern kingdom of Israel. And Micah and that major player, Isaiah, concentrated their ministry toward the southern kingdom of Judah.

So you will agree with me, they were powerful men. But if Jonah is not the greatest of the minor prophets, he is certainly that prophet that is most talked about, most written about, most painted, both in ancient and modern times.

For example, you will find him in the first century if you were there, or at least you will find him still there today in the Roman catacombs. You will find a picture of him on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

You will find Jonah and his fish worked into the stained glass windows of many a European cathedral, as in Cologne. And today you will find him on the Antiques Roadshow, which I was watching just a fortnight ago, when a piece of pottery came up which was fashioned like Jonah.

[2 : 31] And you know those situations. Do you have that on your television when the rather hesitant person hands it to the expert who looks at it and then says, well now about value and you wonder if it's going to be tuppence or two million pounds.

I think on this occasion it was quite a lot of money and the person gasped with relief. Maybe it's the quaint fish, of course, that has made this story so popular.

And Michelangelo had great fun in painting the fish in the Sistine Chapel, if you've ever looked up there to see it. What concerns me and what has led to this sermon this morning is that in modern times at least, at the hands of so many commentators and scholars and preachers, not all, but almost with one voice they condemn him.

And nothing seems too bad to say about this poor man. He's a bigoted nationalist. He's narrow-minded. He lacks love to his enemies. I could give you a very long list, but I won't bore you. Oh, those are the nicest things that are said. There are many much worse. Sitting in a pew last year, I listened to just another tirade against Jonah. And in that pew, the worm turned.

[3 : 44] And I decided then that I'd do my small bit to set the record straight, or at least a little bit straighter. Not that I'm blind to Jonah's faults.

Let me say that straight away. Indeed, he wasn't blind to his own faults, was he? Chapter 1, verse 12. Keep your Bible open. You're going to need it. But you see there, he says to the sailors in the storm, It's my fault that this great storm has come upon you.

So he knew very well that he'd done wrong. That's why I began with the text that I did. He ran away. So right at the beginning of the story, we're told that he was in the wrong.

He rejected God's call. He wouldn't do what he was commanded. And he went away, hopefully to avoid it, but ended in a watery grave.

And then at the end of the book, he's still out of sorts with God and displeased and arguing. So this morning, you may be relieved to know that there I'm trying to give him a fair deal.

[4 : 43] This is not a whitewash. I don't know if you dislike whitewashes. I dislike them intensely. I can't tell you how annoyed I was when one of the best young forwards in Arsenal, who we think in the South is quite a good side in football, was put out of the game last year for nine months with a vicious tackle that broke his leg in about three different places.

And when you turn the television on in the evening and his manager is interviewed, the manager says about the man who did the tackle, oh, you know, he's a nice boy. Oh, he's got such a gentle nature.

He wouldn't have heard a fly. I think he got a yellow card. That was all. And, of course, a fine would be no good because he's earning three billion a week or something of the kind. But really, if you put somebody else out of the game for nine months, you ought to go out of the game for at least two months.

Don't you agree? Just a total whitewash. Now, I'm not going to do that, but I want to put Jonah in a more positive light. And I realized this week that one sermon was not enough for this purpose, so all I can do is to give an introduction, hope that I persuade you, and the book, therefore, will be more profitable for you in the future.

I'm reminded of George Abbott, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 17th century, who preached a sermon on Jonah every Thursday morning for five years. I make that 250 sermons and five sermons for every verse.

[6 : 10] Abbott was a great scholar. He was a translator of the Authorized Version. He was Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, I think, three times. So I guess he's an example of those very clever men that we meet who have absolutely no common sense.

We don't need 500 sermons, but we probably do need more than one. However, I will do my best to say a few introductory words about him.

Remember, Jesus saw Jonah in a very positive light, and I propose to do the same. Because I'm absolutely sure that as long as you think Jonah's a bad fellow, you'll never learn anything from this book.

I mean, just to take one example in anticipation. Jonah ran away, but didn't many of the great ones in the Bible, in the Old Testament especially, didn't they say at the beginning that they couldn't do the job and wanted to get away from it?

What about Moses? What about Abraham? What about Jeremiah? What about the Apostle Peter? Jeremiah wished he'd never been born. Rather like Jonah.

[7 : 16] The fact is that these great prophets that we revere in the Old Testament are not plaster saints. God chooses real people as his servants to do his work, not robots.

And all God's servants have pains and perplexities just as you have. And they often have to work to the limit of their understanding in doing what God asks of them.

So three things I want to say this morning. First, what Jonah knew so well. And as you look at the book, I think what you realize is that Jonah knew God.

That was part of his problem. And the revelation you get of God in these four short chapters is quite remarkable, isn't it? We don't have time to look at it in detail. Let me just mention the three or four things.

In this book, God is seen as creator. Chapter 1, verse 9. He confesses to the sailors, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land. In these four chapters, we see God as judge, looking down on the cities of the world.

[8 : 21] Chapter 1, verse 1. And seeing their wickedness, wickedness, because they're responsible to him. Isn't that an extraordinary thought? That God today, from his throne, sees all the wickedness, all that is going on in the capitals of our world today.

From Shanghai to Los Angeles, from Moscow to Cape Town, Sydney to Edinburgh, Paris to Tokyo. It's all known to God. And then in these four chapters, God is a savior.

You get that lovely statement, don't you? In chapter 2, verse 9. And then, salvation comes from the Lord. Jonah knew that. So Jonah knew God was creator, judge, and savior.

Marvelous picture. Who is God like unto you? As I think Hosea says. But one verse stands out, doesn't it, of them all. Chapter 4, and verse 2.

He prayed to the Lord, O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? You can't help yourself, can you? That's why I was so quick to feed to Tarshish.

[9 : 24] I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God. Slow to anger, abounding in love. A God who relents from sending calamity. I knew you'd do that.

It's just typical of you. Seven times in the Old Testament, this wonderful creed of verse 2 is repeated. Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it wonderful? Can you see a great gulf between the God of the Old Testament and the revelation of God through Jesus Christ when you look at that verse?

I can't. I'm reminded of an incident in the life of the late Professor Tom Torrance. He, in 1944, I think it was, he was an acting church of Scotland chaplain in the fierce fighting in Italy.

And as a chaplain, he was serving as a stretcher bearer during the night of the 17th of October. As daylight returned, he came across a young soldier, scarcely 20 years old, lying mortally wounded on the ground with obviously very few minutes to live.

Let me quote. As I knelt down and bent over him, he said, Padre, is God really like Jesus? I assured him he was, the only God there is.

[10 : 47] The God who has come to us in Jesus, shown his face to us, and poured out his love to us as our Savior. And as I prayed and commended him to the Lord Jesus, he passed away.

Isn't that a lovely question? Padre, is God like Jesus, really? Interestingly enough, when Torrance went back to his parish in Scotland, an elderly lady, also very close to the end of her life, asked him exactly the same question.

Is God really like Jesus? Well, you remember what Jesus said, He who has seen me has seen the Father. And in those words, Jesus is claiming to be just like the God of Jonah, the Creator, Judge, and Savior of the world.

So what then was the message about God that Jonah was given to preach? It's a very, very serious one, isn't it? He was given to preach a message against Nineveh of God's fierce anger, final judgment, and everlasting destruction from the presence of God.

And why did Jonah flee from such a commission? Listen to this. Because he knew that a proclamation of the judgment and anger of God was a supreme mercy ministry.

[12 : 08] Did you get that? That this message alone would bring a wicked city or wicked people to their senses, as indeed it did in chapter 3, verse 6. Now, I would assume that all of you here, all of you at any rate who are older, know the sad situation in the established denominations of the churches in the West and not least in the Church of England and the Church of Scotland.

And the weakness of these churches in recent generations is because, in large part, the training of their ministers. Liberal theological orthodoxy has eliminated, by and large, the message of divine judgment.

I know, because I was trained under that aegis at Cambridge University. And we can't avoid that just because we're evangelical churches.

We shall be touched by the same thing if we're not careful. I had lunch at our evangelical ministry assembly with a young minister who was a member of a group of charismatic evangelical churches in London, many of them, very large indeed.

And over lunch, he said to me, he said, do you realize that in our churches the wrath of God and his fierce anger is never mentioned? In other words, the supreme mercy ministry of Jonah is not given to those people.

[13 : 34] And if that message is not given, then many people will never wake up in this world of their need of forgiveness. I remember medical students coming to me once from Bart's Hospital in London and saying, our assistant chaplain goes around to all the people who are sick and dying and says, don't worry, all is well.

Will you please go and talk to him? Well, of course I couldn't. I couldn't tell him that he was missing out the great mercy ministry of warning people that all was not well, that they might repent.

In church, just a few weeks ago, we were singing that old hymn, I think it's 962 in your hymn books, about judgment. There are only, I think, three hymns in your blue book on the judgment of God.

It's the one that starts, great God, what do I see and hear? And the third verse goes like this. Now, I'm sure when you hear him sometimes that the tune is in your head for the rest of the week.

Let me tell you, a line from this verse was in my mind for about a fortnight afterwards. In fact, it still is. And I think you'll guess which line it is as I read the verse.

[14 : 43] verse 1. Verse 1. Verse 1. But sinners filled with guilty fear shall see his wrath prevailing, for they shall rise and find their tears are wholly unavailing.

They trembling stand before the throne, all unprepared to meet him. All the week, and all the fortnight afterwards, that phrase was in my mind, all unprepared to meet him.

I thought of a favorite uncle and aunt of mine. Indeed, I could have thought of other relatives of mine, of whom it would have to be said that they were utterly unprepared to meet him. No one ever told them of the dangers ahead.

Ever since that, singing that hymn, you know, I've been looking around on the people as I've passed, looking at the people on the television, said, looking on the people on the football field, all unprepared to meet him.

Of many, many people, that's true, isn't it? Because no one has warned them. And who is largely responsible for seeing to it that the churches in the West have no message of the judgment of God and never warn people of the dangers ahead?

[15 : 58] It's the theological halls and colleges of many of our churches who, instead of teaching the message of the Bible, teach that old message that the old serpent gave in the Garden of Eden.

Do you remember? Surely you shall not die. Didn't it get an awful thought that that assistant chaplain at Bart's Hospital, an immense hospital in those days, was going around passing the enemy's message on instead of God's message?

I don't know if that shocks you. It shocks me. What a strange contrast it is that the modern church refuses to preach Jonah's message on grounds that it is not true since God is love.

Whereas Jonah refused to preach this message on grounds that it is true that a loving and gracious God will judge and that this message will awaken sinners so that he might have mercy upon them.

Well, in the end, as you know, Jonah came to his senses. He obeyed God. He preached this awesome message. Must have been quite a man of courage, don't you think? I admire him walking into Nineveh to tell them that they were just about to be overthrown when they were in their pomp and glory.

[17 : 10] It was jolly noisy in Buchanan Street yesterday if you walked along. We had an elderly clergyman preaching the gospel. We had a socialist group vigorously preaching against George Brown.

And we had a little Scottish band making a tremendous din with trumpet and drum. I don't know whether they were trying to shut everybody up.

And I went on my way wondering whether they were trying to shut up the elderly man preaching the gospel. or the socialist. I don't know. If you were part of that band do come and tell me who you were trying to drown out. Jonah then so far out of tune with his God.

So strange for a prophet isn't it that he wouldn't pass on this message that was actually intended to be a mercy ministry. There must have been very serious reasons why Jonah wouldn't do it.

So secondly what Jonah desired so passionately passionately and if you don't desire these things passionately I'd be very surprised. There must be something wrong with you as a Christian. He wanted passionately that God should be just and Jonah wanted passionately that God would be faithful to his people.

[18 : 26] And those two marks of justice and faithfulness are the key things aren't they in the Old Testament that make God different from all the gods of the heathen. Jonah passionately wanted God to be just and righteous with this wicked nation of Assyria.

The Assyrian Empire of the time was the most brutal in all human history. And if you doubt me you've only got to go to the British Museum which has got a vast amount of evidence of the Assyrian Empire and the appalling things that they did.

I was going to quote them to you. What they did to people when they met them. But it would only make you sick all day. You wouldn't be able to eat your Sunday dinner and you'd have nightmares all night.

If you compare what the Assyrians did when they tortured their enemies it is honestly worse than Stalin and the Holocaust and the terrors of Cambodia put together.

Hundreds of cities before and during Jonah's day and afterwards suffered from the Assyrians until finally they were defeated by the Babylonians in 612 BC.

[19 : 35] Jonah cried out for justice on them. Just as we do when a judge lets off somebody with a very light sentence. We've had a number of those in the paper recently at home.

You know a young man who's drunk who kills two children by driving dangerously and the judge sends him to prison for four years of which he'll get two years off. Are you surprised then when the parents of those children complain?

They say we want justice. This man should have to suffer more. Jonah cried out for justice and vengeance but it didn't come.

I was going to say it never came but it did. It came a generation or two later. Just turn over to Naomi. I wonder if you've ever read Nahum. I've never studied him seriously until I looked at Jonah. There's a lovely commentary on him in the New Bible Commentary 21st Century edition by Mike Butterworth and if you've got a nephew or niece who's seriously concerned with Bible study why not give them a present of the New Bible Commentary for Christmas?

[20 : 41] Yes in the end God did judge but not in Jonah's lifetime. We won't read it again it was read so well for us but notice what is said at the very end of Nahum at the very end after we're told that God did ultimately bring justice to that terribly cruel country what do we read in the last verse?

Nothing can heal your wound your injury is fatal everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall for who has not felt your endless cruelty?

Now that's healthy. That's like the great anthems at the end of the book of Revelation when God finally brings all evil to an end and punishes it as it deserves and the whole universe rejoices at justice.

Nahum is a fascinating book because it tells us that in the end God does give justice. But you see the problem? It was a real problem for Old Testament people because they didn't have the perspective we have of an eternal world ahead of us.

they expected prosperity and rewards now to faithful people and judgment to wicked people now. That's why in the Psalter verses Psalm 37 73 they're puzzled why God allows people to get away with it.

[22 : 08] So Jonah couldn't understand why they were allowed to get away with it. It's still a problem isn't it? We won't turn to 2 Peter 3 you know but there's that long passage isn't there in 2 Peter 3 I'm sure you know it very well where the pagans are saying where is the promise of his coming?

He's never going to come to judge the world and Peter says don't forget this with the Lord a day is like a thousand years the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise he's patient not wanting anyone to perish but the day of the Lord will come like a thief and so it was.

Jonah wanted second passionately that God would be faithful to his people. Now here I do want you to turn up in the Bible and will you please with the rustling of the leaves reassure me that you are still with me by turning to 2 Kings chapter 14 and you will see there what Jonah's ministry really was in his day and it's a very remarkable one.

He lived in the days of Jeroboam the second of Israel. Israel is going downhill fast to extinction. Even Ralph Davis can't make these last chapters of 2 Kings very interesting because they're so dreary.

Every king that succeeds in Israel is more evil than the one before. So it is with Jeroboam the second. And yet though he did evil in the eyes of the Lord verse 24 he was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel in accordance with the word of the Lord the God of Israel spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai.

[23 : 42] So an extraordinary thing happens and the reason is in verse 26. the Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel was suffering. So instead of bringing them to destruction then and there he enlarged their borders as far as one can see looking at the map the borders were enlarged back to the days of Solomon.

And this was all due to the word of God through the prophet Jonah. So Jonah in the middle of disaster of declension of the nation going downhill of the people suffering is given good news that God will enlarge their borders again and protect them.

And now God is going to release Nineveh and Jonah knows perfectly well that means a very dark future for Israel. And the last chapters of two kings are very depressing.

Finally we are told is it in chapter 17 of two kings? I think it is. That in the ninth year of Hoshua the king of Assyria captured Samaria deported the Israelites to Assyria and settled them and they were

no more and they have been no more ever since.

Don't forget that. The northern kingdom of Israel then and there disappeared and no one knows any successors to it except certain cranks who think they live in Britain I think.

[25 : 02] Have you ever heard of the British Israelites? I think they have disappeared. Jonah was not a bigoted nationalist. He was a servant of the people of God intent on their survival desperate that the light shouldn't be turned off.

Are you not concerned with the Church of Scotland in this country as I am concerned with the Church of England? We are going through a period of utter declension down south with the Anglican Church split from top to bottom.

The same in America. It could be that God's judgment on the unfaithfulness of the churches in the West will mean that he looks elsewhere for life.

not to us. Jonah is concerned that God will be faithful to his people and not allow them completely to be destroyed.

Well they were destroyed and only Judah survived. Sometimes God's ways can be very mysterious and Jonah is not the first person to find it so.

[26 : 02] If you are older, if you are as ancient as me sitting in the congregation, I don't know your age but if you are like me, some of you must be, do you remember the early fifties when all the missionaries were turned out of China?

Do you remember the terrible suffering that the church went through in China in the sixties and seventies? Wasn't that mysterious? And now, though you didn't hear of it, of course during the Olympics, the church in China is one of the strongest growing churches in the world.

We are told recently on good authority there are 10,000 baptisms a day in that vast country, 10,000 a day. Is that not amazing? In the end, God is justified.

In the end, he's faithful. But it's sometimes mysterious en route, isn't it? Thirdly and finally, let's think of what Jonah was invited in the last chapter, chapter four.

I love chapter four of Jonah. Let's turn back to it, will you? Page 3,225 or whatever it is. There's a stupid habit in churches now where everybody has to be treated like children. They don't know how to find the Bible.

[27 : 16] Of course, they don't. Chapter four of Jonah. If you can't find that, there's no hope for you. I love this chapter because it's so typical of what God is doing with his servants throughout the Bible.

I suppose the key sentence is the last one, isn't it? Should I not be concerned? That's very, very typical, isn't it, of the Lord. Jesus did that in the Gospels, didn't he?

He would say, you criticize me for going after these sinners and these tax collectors, but don't you go after your lost sheep? In other words, he justifies his own behavior.

And God reasons with many of his great ones in the Bible like that. He had to reason with Moses. He had to reason with Elijah. He had to reason with Jeremiah and he had to reason with Jonah, as he has to reason with you and me.

And what God is saying in this lovely fourth chapter, and I must leave you to work this out for yourself, but let me give you a hint as to what is being said here. What God is saying is, I must be myself, Jonah.

[28 : 24] You know, Jonah, that I'm a creator, that I'm a judge, that I'm a savior. I must be myself. As a judge, should I not be concerned at the 120,000 who know not their right hand from their left and these cattle?

The population of Ninnah was far greater than that. Do you remember that they lost 186,000 soldiers when Sennacherib went against Jerusalem? So if they had 186 soldiers who could be lost in the army, think of all their wives and their children and their mothers-in-law and their families, the population of Ninnah must have been very great.

So I take these people, though it's a difficult thing to decide, I take these people to be those who are ignorant. Perhaps the young, the very young. And the cattle, obviously, a picture of innocence. It's rather like that conversation with Abraham, shall not the judge of all the earth do right? Will he destroy when there are those there who do not deserve to be destroyed? Should I not be concerned for them?

I'm a just judge. Second, should I not be concerned as their creator? Verse 10, you see, Jonah, you were made happy by making for you that vine, that bush that preserved your life from the sun.

[29 : 48] And then I destroyed it. And that made you confused and angry, that I should make something that made you happy, and then I destroyed it. You know that's not like me.

I'm not a destroying God. I'm a creator. So do you expect me then to create many people to be responsible for their lives and then destroy them arbitrarily?

I think that's the argument, isn't it? It's a very simple one. I find it fascinating that God has placed in our hearts, especially in his people's hearts, a concern for people physically and materially.

That's why Christians have always been behind health and hospitals. What's it William Temple said? Christians started the hospitals and atheists occurred in them. That's why we're against abortion and euthanasia on demand.

And incidentally, just at the moment, that's an issue in the presidential campaign over the other side of the ocean, isn't it? Because the Democrats are not trusted about abortion. God is concerned for people physically, even though they don't believe in him.

[30 : 58] Even though they know nothing about him. And he's put that in your heart and mine.

That's why we were praying for the people in Burma. He's got to be truthful to himself as judge.

He's got to be truthful to himself as creator. He's got to be truthful to himself as savior. And that's where the rebuke of gender is very straight. What right have you got to be angry? I saved you from the depth of a watery grave.

I delivered you. Can I not deliver these people? Well, there's much more to be said about that. But I love the way in which God reasons with his people and his servants today.

Jonah was brought to understand more deeply than he had before, I think. Jonah was a man with a great ministry. I want you to know that as I finish. Jesus said the men of Nineveh will rise up on the judgment day because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, whereas the Capernaum people did not repent at the teaching of Jesus.

He had a great ministry. But like all God's servants everywhere, Jonah struggled with the continuance of a wicked world and with the state of the church under the painful judgments of God.

[32 : 19] He knew God. And yet the world still went on being so wicked as it does today and the church still goes on being so weak. And therefore God has to reason with Jonah as he has to reason with us and help us through our perplexities.

So, don't denigrate Jonah. Realize that he faced exactly the same problems as we do today, living in a world of wickedness and a church that at the moment in the West has been under the judgment of God, but which he longs to revive.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for this brave preacher, Jonah.

And we ask that you will make your church in Britain, England and Scotland in particular we think of today where we come from, brave to preach this mercy ministry, to warn people so that the multitudes we see on the streets may not go into the future all unprepared to meet him.

Give us the courage not to run away. Give us the courage to speak boldly as in the end Jonah did. And in your mercy grant that many today might repent and that you would be in your mercy faithful and gracious to them.

[33 : 54] who is like unto thee a forgiving God. How we praise you for that heavenly Father as we come to you this morning in Jesus name. Amen.