

Jonah Flees From the LORD

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

3 But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

4 Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. 5 All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. 6 The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

7 Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

9 He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

10 This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

11 The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

12 “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. 14 Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.” 15 Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. 16 At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

Jonah’s Prayer

17 Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2 1 [a]From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. 2 He said:

“In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.
3 You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.
4 I said, ‘I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.’
5 The engulfing waters threatened me,^[b]
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.
6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.
But you, LORD my God,
brought my life up from the pit.

7 “When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

8 “Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God’s love for them.
9 But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’”

10 And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

The story of Jonah and the whale is a popular one, particularly with our children at Storybags and ADventure! where we tell the version from The Storyteller Bible which is called Jonah the Groaner. It’s a great one to tell, because we get the children to groan loudly every time we read the word “groan”, which, incidentally, happens 11 times in the story! But it’s not just a story for the children, the parents and the carers like it too, and they join in with the groaning!

That’s possibly because Jonah is such a relatable character – quite happy with the status quo, and suddenly God places a call on his life asking him to go to do something that he really doesn’t want to. In the storyteller version, Jonah is talking to God, responding to God’s direct command and he says: “Oh, no, Not Niniveh!” I like this line in this version, in fact I like the way the whole story is written and so I’ve included it on the accompanying sheet. I like the way that Jonah is shown as having

one to one conversations with God. God speaks, Jonah responds (albeit it negatively) God speaks again, Jonah runs off in the other direction!

But the conversation between Jonah and God is very real in this version, and in real life Jonah would have been having a one to one with God – in prayer. It may not be what we think about when we think about prayer and what it is. In my house I have a small space that's called an "oratory" a space set aside for the sole purpose of prayer and worship. It is affectionately called the "cell" and from it I sit quietly at points during the day and speak with God. Sometimes not so quietly if my dogs are having a moment downstairs, but nonetheless the space in this little room remains still and purposeful.

Nine times out of ten prayer isn't like that – at the moment because we are at home, we have time to stop and pray but quite often if your life is anything like mine, it is prayer on the go. There are even apps for that so you can plug into your phone or smart device and pray whilst on the train or out for a run.

Jonah's conversations were ongoing with God. He tried to back away, make excuses and even ran away but as we know God caught up with him. Like we heard last week when we looked at Psalm 139 in verses 7-10, God is with us always.

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me.*

So it was for Jonah. In the end, the only thing Jonah could do was stop and pray. He had to answer the call.

My friend and colleague Fr Andy Butler said this:

"Sometimes, when Jesus prayed, he went to a quiet place. Sometimes he prayed in a storm however. Maybe as you begin, find a place, but if all you have is a storm, pray there."

And so it is with us. We find ourselves in strange and unforeseen times. It's a war, but we are all at home fighting something we cannot see, it's a storm but the streets and gardens are quiet. God's call to us is to pray with him right now.

We are called to pray into this storm. Not for what we want or hope it to be when we finally get to come back together.

We are called to be thankful for the ongoing conversations we do have with God. Thankful that we know that no matter where we are, he is with us because we are still gathered in his name. We are his people, his church, his community and we are thankful for God's willingness to listen to our prayers, for his loving care during times of storm. It doesn't matter where we are God finds us. He meets us there.

Now we have to think about the when and how of coming back together as we look forward to coming back to our buildings as restrictions are gradually lifted over the coming months.

Next week is the Thy Kingdom Come annual prayer initiative from the 21st to 31st May leading us up to Pentecost. What a time to be in prayer together for the church! Let us come together in prayer for what will be. One of the activities we will be promoting, and everyone will get this information emailed or posted to you, is to encourage everyone from our church and the other churches to pray together at a set time each day. What an opportunity!

We are currently dispersed across the town and in the surrounding villages, and so our prayers will be too. We have the opportunity to blanket the whole area with our conversations with God. Our individual hopes and dreams, we can bring before him our worries so that they may be transformed.

So let us pray together positively, purposefully, not for what we want, but actively, passionately seeking God's will for this community and for His church at large.

Some of you may have a copy of the St. Mary's prayer, it perfectly captures how we can be, no must be, praying for the future of our church and community as we tentatively look forward together in hope:

So let us pray:

Dear God,
Strengthen us to walk in faith
Open our ears, our eyes and our hearts
To the needs of the community.
May your family grow,
As we teach and reach out in your love.
Guide us to work through partnerships,
In the power of your Holy Spirit.
For Jesus' sake and his His name we pray.
Amen

Let Jonah be our example this day, as we come to God in conversation, wherever and whenever, to speak and to listen, to take time to understand the bigger picture, and commit to following God's lead out of the storm.

Jonah the Groaner – from The Storyteller Bible

Jonah was a groaner. That's right – a groaner. So when God told him to go to Nineveh and tell the people who lived there to change their evil ways, what did Jonah do? Jonah groaned. 'Not Nineveh!' he groaned. 'Anywhere but Nineveh. The people who live there are our enemies!'

And when he had stopped groaning, Jonah bought himself a ticket. A ticket for a boat ride. A boat ride that would take him far away from Nineveh. God listened to Jonah groan. God watched him buy his ticket. But God still wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh.

So when the boat reached the deepest part of the sea, God sent a storm. 'God, help us!' cried a sailor. 'We're sinking!' 'God, save us!' cried another. 'We're tipping over!' 'God must be very angry,' cried the captain, 'with someone here on board.' And what did Jonah do? Jonah groaned. 'It's me,' Jonah groaned. 'I'm the one God's angry with. He told me to go to Nineveh, and here I am, sailing in the opposite direction. Throw me into the sea and your troubles will be over.' 'God, forgive us!' the sailors cried as they tossed Jonah into the water. And almost at once, the sea grew calm. 'Oh dear,' Jonah groaned, 'I'm sinking.' 'Oh no,' Jonah groaned, 'I'm going to drown.' 'Oh my,' Jonah groaned, 'that's the biggest fish I've ever seen!' And before he could groan another groan, the fish opened its mouth and swallowed Jonah up!

It was God who sent the fish – to rescue Jonah, and to give him time to think. He had plenty to groan about, of course – the fish's slimy stomach, the seaweed, the smell. But Jonah was still alive – and that was something to cheer about!

So Jonah stopped his groaning and said a prayer: 'I was sinking, Lord. I was drowning. But you saved me. So now I will do whatever you want.' Three days later, the fish spat Jonah up on a beach. And Jonah kept his promise – he went straight to Nineveh and told the people that God wanted them to change their evil ways. 'Forty days is all you've got,' he warned them. 'And if you haven't changed by then, God will destroy your city.'

The people of Nineveh listened. The people of Nineveh wept. Then the people of Nineveh changed! From the king right down to the poorest slave, they decided to do what was right. And what did Jonah do? Jonah groaned. He sat himself down in the shadow of a tree, and he groaned. 'I knew this would happen,' he groaned. 'You are a loving God who loves to forgive. But I still don't like the people of Nineveh and I wish they had been destroyed.' Jonah fell asleep, groaning. And during the night, God sent a worm to kill the tree. When Jonah awoke, he groaned more than ever. 'The tree is dead!' he groaned. 'And now I have no shade.' 'Oh, Jonah,' God sighed. 'You cry about this tree, but you care nothing for the people of Nineveh. I want you to love them like I do.'

'And finally,' God added, 'I want you to stop your groaning!'

