

Sermon, 16 June 2024, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text 1: Jonah 4: 1-11 (taken from New International Version):

¹ But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

⁴ But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

⁵ Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

¹⁰ But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

Text 2: Psalms 147: 7 – 11

⁷ Sing to the Lord with grateful praise;
make music to our God on the harp.

⁸ He covers the sky with clouds;
he supplies the earth with rain
and makes grass grow on the hills.

⁹ He provides food for the cattle
and for the young ravens when they call.

¹⁰ His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;

¹¹ the Lord delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.

The Bible doesn't have too many anti-heroes. This may be due to cultural, historical or liturgical reasons, or more likely a combination of all three but while a degree of violence was permissible amongst some Old Testament characters (always for the right reasons, of course), other vices are rarely welcomed.

It's actually enough to make you wonder how the Book of Jonah got into the Biblical canon at all. Compared with the piety of Paul's epistles or the majestic poetry of many Psalms, Jonah's brand of sarcastic petulance is something of an outlier. Nonetheless, Jesus Himself cited him so there is clearly more than meets the eye in his story.

The basic story of Jonah and the whale is well known. The prophet Jonah is called by God to travel to Israel's arch-nemesis of the time, Nineveh in Assyria, and proclaim its need to repent or be destroyed. None too keen on this idea, Jonah gets on the next ship heading in the opposite

direction, to Tarshish in what is now Spain, but runs into a serious storm caused by God. Not necessarily a villain, he sacrifices himself for the ship's crew by being thrown overboard but gets swallowed by a giant sea creature. Having repented of his disobedience, he is released from inside the creature and ends up in Nineveh where he accomplishes his mission, the city repenting immediately.

It is then when today's reading takes place. Jonah takes actual offence at God's mercy and asks what was the point ? If God is as merciful as His reputation, then wasn't He going to spare Nineveh anyway ? Interestingly, God actually responds to this accusation. He gives Jonah the shelter of a plant in the hot climate, which then dies. Jonah is incensed at the loss but God interrupts his anger to ask, if Jonah cared so much about this plant which he did not even create, shouldn't God have an unfathomable love for the thousands of people in Nineveh whom He created ? Are they worth less than Jonah's plant ? The point of saving Nineveh, a city which should have been beyond the pale anyway, was to demonstrate that love and grace.

The important thing here is not to confuse Jonah's somewhat petulant style with the key question which he is asking – simply why ? What was the reason for God to ask him to go to Nineveh, probably at not inconsiderable risk, in the first place ?

Jonah stands out from many other Biblical stories because he does not conform to the accepted norm of those who would simply accept God's word in faith and then conform without question. At least not openly. However, if you probe a little more deeply, it becomes clear that he is not so alone. Eve encourages Adam in the Garden of Eden to question whether it really matters that God said not to eat of the tree with the

knowledge of good and evil. Without waiting for or seeking an answer, he commits the original sin. The book of Proverbs goes into detail to explain why God's ways make sense. Even Jesus' Disciple Thomas was not necessarily doubting so much as just asking why.

God does not treat His people as children and patronize them. In the Old Testament in particular, He is not seen to put up with open rebellion very often, but nor does He respond to those asking questions by simply telling them to put up and shut up because He knows best. Despite Jonah's rebellious tone, He goes to the trouble of demonstrating to him how great His love is for His Creation, which is the point. Even to God, it is a question which matters.

This is a frightening concept for many. Several faiths worldwide, including many branches of Christianity, do not like the pronouncements of their leaders, preached in the name of God, to be questioned. It's a phenomenon which quite easily spreads to populist politics and media as well. In a climate of extremism, even tolerating the idea that what you say might be questioned is seen all too often as a sign of weakness. However, it is not God's way.

There is a real value to asking why something should be. We will not strengthen our faith by simply taking it as read and failing to think about it any more. Those asking questions in the Bible are not asking whether there is a God at all. They are asking why He should act as He does. They may be complaining, like Jonah, but the question is still the same.

Asking why is not a comfortable question for many Christians either. Why do we believe what we do ? What's the point of going to Church ? Why should anyone spend time praying ? But it serves a key purpose.

We read in Psalm 147 how Creation shouts God's praises. He rules the skies and the earth, maintaining all and feeding His children. In fact, we read throughout the Psalms how the glory of God is evident in the mountains, the jungles, the rivers, the deserts, the oceans and the skies. Indeed, you don't have to go too far from here into the Alps to get a real sense of awe and wonder at what God has made. Despite all this, the Psalm goes on to tell us, "His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of the warrior; the Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love." In other words, God is not that impressed Himself by what He has created. His delight is in those who choose to follow Him.

The wonders of nature are certainly breath-taking. The details of the scientific world defy the understanding of most of us. The scope of the universe is too large for anyone to know fully. However, none of these things, as far as we know, has chosen to be there. They demonstrate God's might but if He is the almighty Creator anyway, in a sense, so what ? He can do anything.

What God does delight in, though, is those who choose to follow Him. That is the reason for the question, "Why ?" mattering so much. The likes of Jonah did not choose to follow God simply because He was there and that was all which mattered. They wanted to know why they should do so. If we ask ourselves why we should be following God, coming to Church, praying to God and acting as Christians, how much more glorious isn't it if we choose to do so of our own free will ? We can't truly love God unless we have the option not to, but choose to do it because it makes sense to follow His way of love and mercy.

Jesus recognized the power of God's love which Jonah was key to demonstrating. In Matthew 12, He tells those claiming that His message of God's love is not enough, that, "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here." If we don't want to choose God, we bring Him no glory. But if we do, we find what Jesus Himself, of His own free will, chose to give us.

So let's not be afraid to ask why, to ask ourselves how come we believe what we do and crucially, why does it matter ? The answers may be uncomfortable. They may be surprising. But they will let us know God as He calls us to know Him.