

Sermon
Jonah Chapter Two

Several years ago, back in the early 1980s, before budget airlines such as Easyjet and Ryan Air had got going, I travelled overnight, across the Irish Sea, on the Belfast-Liverpool ferry. My budget did not stretch to a cabin or even a bunk bed so I was in the company of those who sat up through a cold, dark night as the ship ploughed its slow, slow way through the water. Things were crowded: there were more people than seats, which provoked unwelcome speculation in my mind as to whether there were sufficient places in life boats, should they be required. I found myself making use of one of a pair of kitchen chairs, sitting next to wall in the corridor that led to the doors through which foot passengers entered the ship. Part of the time I was in conversation with a soldier from the British army who occupied the next chair. He told me that his career had taken him to several locations around the world, not all them healthy, involving several modes of transport, but that none equalled the poor quality travelling experience provided on this particular trip.

Some time in the early hours of the morning a group of young men came along the corridor, seeking somewhere to sit down. There was a space on the floor just by the swing doors that had been put in place once the outer door of the ship had been secured and locked, after the final passenger had come on board. One of the young men sat down, rested his back against what to him looked like a solid door on the side of the ship and then found

himself falling backwards as that door swung open. He was back on his feet within an instant and the look on his face and the paleness of his skin told their own story. He thought, just for a second, that these were the outer doors and that he was being pitched out of the ship and into the middle of the Irish Sea on a cold, dark night, never to be seen alive again.

After a moment or two he could see the funny side of the situation that had made the rest of us laugh (we were an unsympathetic crew) but let's take a moment to stay with his feelings as he thought he was heading for a watery grave. How would you feel at the prospect of being man or woman overboard in such conditions? I know I would be terrified and not just because I cannot swim: I think that would make little difference in the circumstances. Now let's imagine something marginally better. You're thrown back into the sea again, though this time you are wearing a life jacket. As you bob about there in the darkness; as you watch the ship that represents safety disappearing into the night; as you try not to swallow too much water from the mighty waves that throw you around; as you try to calculate how long a life jacket stays buoyant in such circumstances; as you wonder whether the cold will kill you first; what are you thinking? What are you praying?

I imagine that most or all of us **are** praying. If, as the old saying goes, there are no atheists in a trench during wartime I'm sure the same holds true for

those who find themselves consigned to the nautical equivalent. So, since we are praying, for what, I would like to ask, are we praying? Are we praying the usual prayer for such situations? ‘Dear God I’m really sorry for doing whatever it was that made you think it helpful to get me into this mess, even though I can’t quite figure out what it was that was so bad that I’ve ended up here. At the same time Lord, should you choose to send along a life boat or rescue helicopter, either of which spots me and plucks me from the water, I would be ever so grateful. In fact, I’ll be so grateful that I’ll always come to church on Sundays and I’ll even listen carefully to every word of the sermon; I’ll always be a good girl or boy in future, **as long as you get me out of here.**’

Or would you be using your prayer time to thank God for the provision of the life jacket?

Jonah, having been pitched into the sea by a ship’s crew fearful for their safety has done plenty of things of which to repent. Prominent amongst them, of course, is that God has commanded him to go to Nineveh in the East and he has responded by doing a runner in the direction of Tarshish in the West. Now, on top of that, God has sent along a big fish to swallow him up and he finds himself in midst of the dark and God and he alone know what else, in the belly of the fish. Most people would think that this is a good time to try that traditional ‘negotiation with God prayer’: get me out

of this and I'll be good in future. Instead, recognising that God has kept him alive, providing him with a most unorthodox form of an all-enveloping life jacket Jonah spends his time performing a prayer of praise for the God who brought him to this situation.

At first sight it looks like the usual 'get me out of this' type prayer: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me; from deep within Sheol I cried for help ... I thought I was banished from your sight and should never again look towards your holy temple." (2: 2, 4) Joel's prayer goes on to speak of the of his sinking into a world from which there is no escape, even as he sinks into the water: "The water about me rose to my neck, for the deep was closing over me ... I was sinking into a world whose bars would hold me fast for ever." (2: 5, 6)

But notice something: all these things are in the past tense. This includes not only the cry for help but the answer that comes from God: "But you brought me up, Lord my God, alive from the pit." This is a prayer for someone who faces deep difficulties but faces them with deep confidence in their God and in God's awareness of them and their plight. Maybe the prayer gets added in afterwards, by the author of the book as a comment on the sort of prayer that Jonah should be praying. Whether or not that is the case, what the prayer, as it is presented, tells us about is the sort of

prayerful response we are called to in the situations that we face today, both individually and as a people or peoples.

Jonah's prayer, in the context of the story a prayer prayed as though it has already been positively answered, provides a model for prayers we can and should pray. It reminds us that many of the things we pray for actually come to pass. When I got off the Belfast-Liverpool ferry and came to live in this country, back in the early 1980s I discovered churches that were praying for three things, week-in and week-out, with little evidence to suggest that their prayers were going to be answered. After all, what person in their right mind could believe that the overwhelming weight of the Soviet system would be removed from the backs of the people of central and Eastern Europe? Who but the most unrealistic optimist could conceive that the apartheid system in South Africa would be dismantled? And anyone who said that the murderous complications of political life in Northern Ireland might be resolved through some type of peaceful solution obviously did not know what they were talking about. The rest, as they say, is history.

Now, of course, we know things are not that simple: you don't just say a prayer, asking God for something and the desired answer comes ping-pong back faster than an automated e-mail response. Jonah's prayer on the other hand; prayer which can be prayed by and for anyone who thinks they have

ever let God down at one time or another – which I guess is all of us – provides a model of attitude for prayer in difficult situations. All our prayers, this suggests, even the ones in time of difficulty, contain an element of thanksgiving: “Those who cling to false gods may abandon their loyalty,” declares Jonah, “but I with hymns of praise shall offer sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I shall fulfil. Victory is the Lord’s!” (2: 8-9) I’m coming more and more to the view that the traditional pairing of thanksgiving with intercession in prayer during worship is a good one. It brings us to prayer, firstly with the reminder of the good things God has done for us, including the life jackets that keep us afloat in the sea of life.

Let’s make sure to continue to pray for all of today’s hopeless causes, like the Church used to do back in the 1980s and has done in the subsequent decades. Let’s keep on praying about places where people go hungry for lack of food. Let’s pray for situations where peace remains elusive or injustice seems to be the order of the day. Let’s bring to God the intractable personal situations of our individual lives and of those known to us; ill-health, financial struggle, fragile or broken relationships, the sense of deep loss that comes through bereavement and the worries about what awaits **us** at the end. Let’s come to God with prayers of confidence rather than calculation, prayers of thanksgiving as well as asking; thanks for health and healing, thanks for our experience of prosperity, the growth of the fair trade

movement and for supportive friendships; thanks for lives well-lived and confidence in God's continuing care for each one of us.

It's better to be found thanking God for the provision of the life jacket than just trying to strike a bargain with the divine. As Jonah puts it, "I was sinking into a world whose bars would hold me fast for ever. But you brought me up, Lord my God, alive from the pit." And in the story, at that point, as that thankful attitude is expressed, "The lord commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out on to the dry land." (2: 10) And what happened next? And what could that mean for me and you?

Well ... come back next month; third Sunday, same time, same place and find out!