

# Lifegroup notes from Sunday 16 October 2022

Reading: Jonah chapter 3

We've reached Jonah as we get to the fifth week in our current series on the Minor Prophets.

2 Kings 14:25 very helpfully gives us a solid date for the prophecy of Jonah, son of Amittai, as during the reign of king Jereboam II (782-741BC) our best guess is that Jonah is prophesying at the mid point so in the 760's BC, that season where the Northern Kingdom has been overtaken by neighbours and has been making political alliances that have frequently proved disastrous.

Jonah means "Dove" and it's significant when we take a wider look at scripture to see this "dove" coming between the dove that brought news to Noah's ark that the land had become fruitful again, and the dove that descended on Jesus as a sign of Father's blessing and approval. This dove too is a sign of God's salvation and promise.

I would suggest that the best way to read Jonah is as a comedy. Very often we read it as a kind of warning, teaching us not to be like Jonah, but as I read it I think we are actually meant to identify strongly with him. He is just like us, and the ridiculous lengths he goes to to avoid doing what's right might echo ours at times. In this story Jonah is the only one who knows who Yahweh is, yet it is those who don't know that behave in a way that shows reverence and fear.

At times Jonah is disobedient, grumpy, offended, and only does what God asks after some severe discipline. Does that remind you of anyone?

The Assyrians had oppressed the Israelites, and had done so most cruelly, in ways that could best be described as evil, and had also taken wealth and young leaders from the land.

The flight to Tarshish brings salvation to the seafarers, who behave in the proper way, even when Jonah does not. Likewise the people of Nineveh hear and respond quickly to the message of



repentance, even when Jonah has resisted preaching it. It's as though pretty much everyone else gets God's plan, even though Jonah resists.

Now, we know that Jonah's resistance to God's plan was because he new God would be merciful if the Ninevites repented, and Jonah did not want that. He hated the Ninevites for all they had done to his people. Bluntly, his writing-off of an entire people group

because of (recent) historical enmity is little short of racism. And yet God's response to him is to challenge him that the people of Nineveh are God's children too, as well as there being many cattle who would have come under the judgement. (there's a fascinating aside here, as the animals have sackcloth placed on them as well as the people of the city, and God declares he has mercy on them too!)

The book of Jonah doesn't end neatly with a repentant Jonah celebrating the revival God has brought. Rather, it ends with a question that searches the conflicted heart. God asks Jonah "should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120 thousand people...?" We don't get an answer, perhaps because it's a question God continues to ask to each generation of those who follow him, challenging us to examine our hearts to root out our own prejudices.



## Some questions

- What encouraged or challenged you in this message?
- There are lots of different styles of writing in the Bible. Do you agree that Jonah can be read as a comedy? If so, is it true that sometimes we need to laugh at ourselves?
- Can you think of times those outside of the family of faith have behaved better than those inside?
- People often get tied in knots trying to scientifically explain the fish / whale experience of Jonah. If the Bible is first a work of theology not science, what difference does that make?
- The great challenge here is to self-examination. Have there been times you've worked hard to avoid doing what God has told you / us to do?
- Jonah ends with a question. Can we think of people groups that God could challenge us on regarding our attitudes and heart?