



## Thoughts on Jonah 1

*By Karen Stallard, Union Chapel Minister*

Why do we think Jonah did not want to go to that great city?

The great city of Nineveh was for Jonah a no-go zone. The great city of Nineveh contained people who were not his people

The great city of Nineveh worshiped other Gods, celebrated other festivals, ate different food, the people looked different, behaved differently, and quite frankly were not the sort of people a decent God worshiping fellow like Jonah would normally mix with.

Nineveh was great, it was probably the biggest city in the region and we all know what big cities are like, we live in one, but some of us know what strange big cities are like as well.

There are some big cities you don't go to as a tourist on your own, there are some parts of a big city which you never venture into, because they are dangerous, they hold stories of murder, violence and rape, especially if you are a foreigner.

Imagine if God told you to go, on your own to Baghdad? You might well think twice. What about Pyongyang, capital of N Korea?

I can honestly say if I felt that i was being called to Pyongyang then i would really do my best to ignore that call. I would not want to end up in a city where only the elite of the country are allowed to enter, a city where people are so shut off from the rest of the world that they would find me to be a real alien and a threat to their world. I would look completely different to them. A city where the rich live in luxury whilst the rest of the country starve and freeze to death in the winter, a city where the voice of the people is silenced, the arts are censored and i suspect if you are anything other than conforming you are conveniently silenced. I would suggest that me going to Pyongyang would be a very bad idea, I would not be able to be myself and if i was then surely my life would be in danger.

What really annoys me is when you read commentaries on Jonah and the commentator says something like “we can learn from Jonah, he should never have run away from God, he was rebellious and we are not to be like Jonah!”

I actually think the most sensible and normal thing Jonah did was to get on that boat and run away from his calling. If he had not done just that then what happened next would never had happened. You see, Jonah running away was inevitable, and it is a



part of the story and it is a good part of the story, in fact it is the most realistic and normal part of the story and yet we make a big thing about how terrible it was he ran away.

Jonah was not terrible to run away, he was being very human and he needed to run away in order to have the time to reflect on his attitude towards Ninevah and towards God, and his running away gave him precisely that.

We have all learnt as adults to run away from that which frightens us, from that which is alien and unknown, from danger. The story of Jonah is a story of a man being cleansed from his fear, being stripped of his prejudice and being brought to a place of maturity which without his journey he would have never achieved.

So here in chapter 1 we see Jonah's realisation that in following God he cannot run away from that which he is so fearful of, he cannot run away from entering into a relationship with people he is clearly hating and wishing were dead.

Jonah's story gives us some insight into our own behaviour around things we want to avoid.

### **1. He runs away and is willing to spend money to avoid his fear.**

Running away always costs us, and we are very happy to pay, and in some instances we will give our right arm to escape and get away from that which frightens us.

This makes me think of addictions, and how people will easily spend the little they have on something which just helps them escape for a little bit. We might look on and say 'gosh, what a waste of money', but to that person it is worth every penny if it gets them away from that which they do not want to face.

### **2. To avoid going to Ninevah, a godless city, he travels to Tarshish! Away from God!**

Now there is an irony in this, but I think it illustrates wonderfully how truly illogical we can be with our fears and how also we end up facing the very thing we are running away from. Jonah ended up on a boat with a load of people who worshipped other gods, just like the people of Ninevah, he could not run from God and when he did he found God amongst the godless anyway.

This feels like quite a complex thing, it is a bit like a girl who is beaten by her father, running away from home and shacking up with a guy who then beats her up; she then needs to escape again but until she is brave enough to jump out of the cycle she will continue to run towards that which she is running away from.



### **3. Jonah falls asleep**

Now I do like this bit! This is so typically human it is unbelievable. when things are really bad because we have run away we tend to just shut our eyes and go to sleep. The ultimate form of running away is to just go to sleep, to retreat away from the reality of life and allow our rational mind to detach itself. Depression is a form of a sleep, a shut down of emotions, a break down of functioning. Now this is where again i want to get cross with all the commentators who have a go at Jonah for being asleep. If you ask me, in a storm, on a boat, the best thing you can possibly do is batten down the hatches and sleep until it passes by. Some of you may have experience domestic violence or known someone caught up in it, and interestingly enough one of the biggest challenges for the man or woman who is being abused is to wake themselves up to the fact that what is happening needs to stop. It is like they are in a trance, often a very depressed one, and no matter how much they are shaken and whacked around they just cannot be roused enough to jump out the boat. Don't be surprised when someone is going through a really rough time if they seem like they are asleep, or indeed if they literally need lots more sleep. It is our way of coping and it was Jonah's way of coping. One imagines that several of the sailors tried to wake Jonah but it took the captain of the ship to go down and rouse him and make him wake up to what was happening around him. When we are asleep sometimes we do need help to wake up, and sometimes it takes someone important to us to do the job!

### **4. Jonah is found out**

Ok so up until now Jonah has kept his running away a secret, but now is the time for the secret to be revealed. Often we are found out through a random set of circumstances, the lots are random but they revealed the truth about Jonah. Sometimes we just cannot talk without some kind of prompt. Perhaps Jonah had given all sorts of half truths as to why he was sailing to Tarshish but not he was given the opportunity to reveal his real intentions for his trip. He was running away and finally he was able to confess to this fact enabling the sailors to be able to make informed decisions about what to do next. After we have woken up and when the opportunity to talk about what we are running away from comes, it is a real relief. But with it comes the dawning realisation that something needs to change, the cat is out of the bag and there is no going back.

### **5. Jonah realises his running away has put others in danger**

There is no denying that when we run away from things which we need to face it affects those around us. As we are dosing away in our blissful state of avoidance so the people around us feel the effects of our running away. But what I find so helpful about the story of Jonah is that it is not until he is woken up and he is found out that



he realises how much danger he has put other people in. Don't expect sleeping people to be aware of how much their avoidance is affecting others, they need to be woken up first and then they need to be shown the reality. I can really relate to this personally, when I was running away from my sexuality, asleep and in denial, i was a dangerous person to be around. I caused mini storms for other people with my homophobic comments. We can relate this also to extremists and other fundamentalists, they are in a kind of a running away slumber and in that state they are truly dangerous to others around them.

When we do eventually wake up it is like a bomb shell as we realise the rubbish we have caused to others, it is at this point the real transformation takes place, not only do we save ourselves but we release others from the terrible storm of our avoidance.

## **6. Jonah is willing to be thrown overboard into the deep unknown and is swallowed by a big fish.**

Jumping out of the boat which is going the wrong way is one of the most terrifying but brave things to do. When we realise that actually the way we have been going, or the way we have been dealing with something is completely wrong and harmful and destructive to ourselves and to others then we are willing to throw in the towel, to give it all up and we jump, we jump into the cleansing depths, we tumble down through the waters and we get swallowed up by a big fish and there we are able to reflect on our journey so far. For me the big fish is the pause in our story, the big fish is the point of no return, Jonah has turned around and has found a resting place.

The big fish is a bit like a good rehab centre, and we all need time and space if we are to endeavour to face that which we have been so frightened of. Coming to a place of acceptance of our call, an acceptance of ourselves, our gifting and vocation takes a journey like Jonah's and we shouldn't be surprised if we find ourselves in a similar position to Jonah at different times in our lives. Fulfilling our potential is a process which involves all the above

- running away
- paying anything to avoid that which we are running away from (often ourselves)
- falling asleep
- being found out
- discovering how we are damaging others
- throwing ourselves into the deep
- resting in the belly of a big fish



The difficulty is when we get stuck somewhere along the process, that is where we might need some help from some sailors along the way!

So as you reflect on things in your life, you might be thinking gosh I am fast asleep here, ask yourself the question, do I need to wake up, is there a storm brewing? You see the story of Jonah really helpful shows us a process which sometimes needs to happen in order for us to mature into the people we were created to be. But Chapter 1 is just the beginning of the story, so don't think if you have just landed in the big fish rehab that it is all over, no not at all, it has only just begun!