

## Oh Jonah!

The story of Jonah is a well-known one. You will find the book of Jonah amongst the books of prophecy in the Old Testament. Jonah is commanded by God to go and preach to the people of Ninevah. God wanted Jonah to challenge the wickedness of the people of the city. At this stage of the story we don't know why, but Jonah had no intention of doing what God had told him to do so he ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish instead. On his way he boarded a ship but God sent a great storm on the sea which threatened to break up the ship. In great fear, the sailors all cried out to their gods, but to no avail. Eventually, when he was woken up from a deep sleep Jonah admitted that he might be the root of the problem and he pleaded with the sailors to be thrown overboard – which eventually they did only for the storm to still. Meanwhile God sent along a big fish which swallowed Jonah and delivered him safely to dry land.

Now God repeated his original command for Jonah to go and preach his message of repentance to the people of Ninevah. Not surprisingly, Jonah was obedient to God's command this time and so off he went to the City of Ninevah and preached to the people there. Now, the people of the City, including the king, responded to Jonah's preaching and they turned from their evil ways and turned back to God. When God saw how the people of Ninevah had responded to Jonah's preaching he forgave them for the evil behaviour and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

You would expect Jonah to be very pleased with himself for preaching God's message so effectively and with such a good result, but instead he is angry with God because of his compassion. And so now we discover the reason why Jonah did not want to go and preach to the people of Ninevah in the first place. He knows that his God is a merciful and compassionate God who longs to be able to forgive people their sins. But Jonah can't bear the thought of the people of Ninevah being forgiven – it seems he would have been happy though to have seen them totally destroyed.

The story of Jonah tells us a great deal about the nature of God and of his willingness and even longing to forgive those who err and stray from the narrow path he lays before people. The story of Jonah also challenges human nature when it tends to seek vengeance and refusing to forgive.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are at the heart of the Christian message. After all, Jesus died and rose again from the dead in order to demonstrate the limitless love that God has for the people he creates. Jesus' death and resurrection also demonstrate that God's power to forgive is without limit. Does compassion and a longing to forgive rule your heart?

James