



+ This Sunday at Magdalen Road church we continued our morning series by looking at the book of Jonah. In this topical series over the first six weeks of 2018 we are considering the theme of 'diversity', thinking about ethnicity and how we can be faithful loving Christians at this time where are cities and neighbourhoods can be so mixed. Why do churches so often end up being full of the same kind of person? Whether educational economic or in terms of ethnicity? How do we overcome a fundamental fear of 'other'?

The book of Jonah is a little like the classic film the Sixth Sense. where a truth that's revealed at the end of the film changes how we understand the entire film. That's there in Jonah as it finally becomes clear why Jonah runs from the Lord - so we really understand what this is a book about.

We began the sermon though by considering a book by a man called Alan Jacobs entitled to learning how to think. It's a book that describes and explores how in our current culture we are very often unable to discuss and engage with views that are not our own. He describes groups of people as 'Repugnant cultural others' - those perhaps who perhaps vote in a different way from us, or who look different from us or believe different things and so we count them as unworthy for us to even interact with. You see this all over the internet as we filter out voices we don't like or agree with, and so are unable to cope with engaging with.

What we see at the heart of the book of Jonah is essentially that Jonah believes the Ninevites to be unworthy of Gods grace.

The book begins with God calling Jonah to head to Nineveh and tell them that their wickedness has reached him, and implicitly that they are to repent. But Jonah runs away - at this point we don't know why. Maybe he is fearful of failure? All of them against him on his lonesome? Maybe he is a conflict avoider? It's not until the final chapter that we find out the answer.

As Jonah eventually arrives at Nineveh in chapter 3 via the belly of the fish and preaches to them we essentially see a mass revival break out! He ought to be rejoicing, but rather there is anger. The book hangs around chapter 4 verse two as there Jonah tells us this why he ran. It's because he knows what God is like, he knows that he is gracious and compassionate slow to anger and abounding in love. Jonah is happy to have that kind of a God himself (we saw in chapter 2 from the belly of the fish he acknowledges his own need of grace), but he's not happy for the Ninevites to receive that Grace also.

Jonah is a book for times like ours when there is much division between people whom we far too

easily think ought not be shown grace by God. Jonah therefore acts as a mirror to us, revealing how we are happy to be shown grace, but at times for others not to receive grace.

We asked three questions of the book to help us grow in these things

1. Who am I in the book of Jonah?

Clearly I am in some sense Jonah. He is actually unique among the minor prophets because the message of the book is not so much what he says, but rather who he is and what he learns of God.

Clearly we're meant to see ourselves in Jonah, however, in a real sense I am actually naturally one of the Ninevites. I am someone naturally who is at enmity with God and deserves his judgement. Perhaps if we start there then we will better be able to see that we are all undeserving of grace? Part of our problem is so easily we think we 'deserve' grace. The natural bent of our hearts is towards earning it.

2. How did Jonah get this so wrong?

One of the surprises in the book is that in chapter 2 in the belly of the fish it looks like Jonah has had some kind of conversion experience. Verse 8&9 are especially helpful as he recognises the foolishness of idolatry and that salvation comes from the Lord - and yet how can he then be so far from God in chapter 4?

What seems to happen is that Jonah is an idolater. He knows things about God, he can tick the proverbial doctrinal boxes and yet he does not know the true God in some senses. Jonah is like us when we say we believe and trust the gospel and yet can so often be driven by other things. Or when we have an understanding of who God is, and yet that image of God is faulty (very often we've simply constructed him in our image).

3. We again need to remember who Our God is!

When the ugliness of our Jonah-like hearts are exposed by God showing Grace to those whom we don't think deserve it, so we need to remember Gods compassion and patience with people like us.

It's striking that after Jonah's anger and outbursts in chapter 4, God does not give up on Jonah but rather seeks to persuade and teach him patiently. This is what our God is like, even to people like us who can be offended by his grace.

Here are some questions to start the conversation in your group:

- Why do you think our world is so divided? Has it always been this way or we living in unusual times?
- are there people in the world who you would struggle with if they turned up to church on Sunday? Whether hypothetical people or even people in your life whom you struggle to love?
- And what does it mean for us to serve a God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, Abounding in love? How is this an encouragement? How is it a challenge?
- How do you think we can get better at recognising Gods grace is never deserved?
- How do you think From the belly of the fish Jonah can pray the kind of prayers he does and yet still resent the Ninevites being shown Grace? Where do we do similar things?
- How does this book apply to us corporately as we think about ourselves as a church in a diverse area?