

Our first reading lands us in the middle of the Book of Jonah, a delightful example of the creative writing that can be found in the Bible. We today would call it 'a short story.' It is a work of fiction, rather like a parable, so it is intended to challenge us and make us think. It is full of exaggeration, satire, and subtle humour that exposes us, even as we chuckle at the carry-on of the reluctant prophet, to the possibility that the last laugh may well be on us.

In today's reading, God orders Jonah, for the second time, to go to the great city of Nineveh in Assyria (present day Iraq). We are all familiar with the first time when, instead of going East in the direction of Nineveh, Jonah gets on a foreign ship going West across the Mediterranean—as far as Spain, he hopes, so that he can get away from God! The ship runs into an exceptionally violent storm and the sailors work out through casting lots—as superstitious Gentiles would typically do--that their Hebrew passenger fleeing from his God is the reason for the storm. Jonah admits that they are right and suggests that throwing him into the sea just might pacify it. This they do and immediately, the sea calms down. This leads the sailors to belief in the God of Israel. Meanwhile, God has appointed an enormous fish to swallow Jonah whole. We pick up the story three days later when the fish has just vomited Jonah up and deposited him on dry land and God says for the second time, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' Jonah is to warn them, 'Give up your auld sins!' They have forty-day's grace to repent of their wickedness and avoid disaster.

After his ordeal, Jonah is more compliant, but to give the people of Nineveh an opportunity like this is the last thing he wants to do. He has a serious legacy issue when it comes to Assyria—a nation known for its brutality, that subjected Jonah's people to one hundred and twenty-five years of oppression. The memory of that has been passed down the generations ever since, so Jonah would much prefer to proclaim an avenging God, great in power, who will by no means clear the guilty (See Nahum 1:2-3). The problem for Jonah, though, is that deep down he knows that God is gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing (Jonah 4:4:2). That is fine for Israel, but if these hateful, inhuman Ninevites are to benefit from such mercy, Jonah wants nothing to do with it.

A retired Church of Ireland bishop, Richard Henderson, wrote a very readable and thought-provoking little book called *The Jealousy of Jonah* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2006). He explains how 'in a gentle and humorous way, [the Book of Jonah] is the most powerful commentary on sectarianism—where religion and national identity can combine to make people lethally uncaring and ignorant of others...[how] It stands as a constant rebuke to our divisions, partitions, denominations and dissociations, and it rebukes with love, humour and patience – thus providing a model for our work of reconciliation and peace building.'

So, isn't it good to be reading the Book of Jonah during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity? This week was first observed in 1908, as part of the early stirrings of what came to be called the ecumenical movement. The word ecumenism comes from a Greek word (*oikoumenē*) that refers to the inhabited world as the home or house that we all live in. From early last century, we Christians have become familiar with the word ecumenism as we have learned that we belong to each other. With the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we have grown in willingness to work and pray urgently for Christian unity and have been able to take concrete steps to restore full communion with each other.

More recently, we have also come to the realization that ecumenism must embrace the other two Abrahamic faiths that have so much in common with us and we have widened the circle of ecumenism even more to include all people of faith who belong to the rich variety of religions that are part of the diversity that enriches our world. Then, even more recently, we have begun to recognize that we share our common home with the whole of creation for which we have a responsibility of care. So, the ecumenism of today includes our efforts to ensure that the earth is once again a home for all creatures. Accordingly, in 2021, the World Council of

Churches is asking us to pray during this week for reconciliation and unity not only among Christians and across the human family, but also with respect to the whole creation.

The Book of Jonah is amazingly relevant to what we might call the ecological dimension of ecumenism. A striking feature of this story is the role that the more-than-human world plays in it. At God's command, the sea rages and then instantly calms down. Again at God's command, a bush grows big enough in one day to shelter the sulking prophet from the sun, and then an obedient worm kills off the bush overnight. The animals in our reading today are as much characters in the story as the humans. We don't hear that the Ninevites put sackcloth on their animals and took away their food and water. No, the animals themselves, along with the humans, stop eating and drinking, cover themselves in sackcloth and cry out to God. Of course, this is a prime example of the author's sense of humour, but there is a serious point to it. The city consists not only of the people who live there, but the animals too. Accordingly, at the end of the story God says, 'Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?' (Jonah 4:11).

Praying for unity with respect to the whole creation, may well throw new light on Jesus' prayer that has become a motto for ecumenism, 'That they may all be one' (John 17:11. 20-21). We hear this prayer today as disciples who are learning that they are part of a unity that is the whole creation. Until recently, we have been living by a myth that we are somehow separate from what we have been thoughtlessly calling 'the natural world'—as if we are not part of it! This has permitted us to become the predatory force that we are in the Earth. Since climate change began to affect us, we are now far more conscious of the interconnectedness of everything on Earth. Even more so, now that we know there is a link between the present pandemic and human destruction of habitats and biodiversity. One of the most common themes in all religions is the experience of union with the divine and of the whole creation as caught up in that unity. It is amazing how the pre-scientific insights of generations of mystics agree with the findings of modern physics and cosmology, that there is a profound unity about the universe. We know now about the origin that we share with everything that exists in the miniscule sphere of matter from which the universe flared forth fifteen billion years ago. Jesus' prayer, 'that they may all be one' invites us today to pledge ourselves to live out that unity as members of the Earth community— humans, animals, plants, land, skies and sea, all sharing the same origin, all intended by the Creator to sustain each other.

The Book of Jonah is a treasure shared by the three Abrahamic faiths. As part of the Scriptures of Israel, it belongs first to the Jews. In Islam, Jonah is considered a prophet and is mentioned several times in the Quran (4:163; 6:86; 21:87; 68:48). For Christians, it is Holy Scripture that we share with Judaism, but it is also a book that Jesus knew, and, according to St Matthew, quoted when he spoke of the sign of Jonah (Matt 16:4) and when he made an unfavourable comparison between those who were hostile to him and the people of Nineveh who were so responsive to Jonah's message (Matt 8:24). Jonah's three days in the belly of the great fish reminded the first Christians of Jesus' three days in the tomb (Matt 12:40) and some of the earliest Christian paintings found in the catacombs of Rome feature Jonah being thrown into the sea or being vomited up by the great fish.

During these days of lockdown, we could all do with a bit of light relief. So, may I recommend Jonah as a Sunday afternoon read during this week of prayer for unity among Christians, across the human family, and with respect to the whole creation. The Book of Jonah is no more than four pages long and impossible to read without smiling. So, if anyone catches you laughing out loud and asks how the Bible could possibly be so amusing, you can always reply, 'That would be an ecumenical matter!'