

Jonah was barfed onto the beach. It was only then that he had realised what the big room was. He stank and wondered how on earth he was going to get rid of the smell. He wandered along the beach and went for the occasional swim to try and wash it away.

He splashed the water playfully and kicked a wave.

But Jonah was not forgetting how he had committed to God that he wasn't going to run anymore. He dreaded though what this commitment might actually mean.

He knew that God was going to call him again to preach against Nineveh. He knew that there was no escape from the cold hard reality of having to put his life on the line. But there was a sense that having just been through a near death experience and realising that God had saved him, Jonah could feel 'protected' to a certain degree.

But just to be sure, he waited for God to call him before he would go any further. Jonah sat on the beach and stared at the sea.

And God spoke.

"Jonah, get up. I want you to go to Nineveh and tell them a message."

Reality hit harder than he thought it would.

Jonah didn't want to do that. Who would? Who would want to put their faith on the line in the face of adversity? Well, Brian Tamaki of Destiny Church does. Brian Tamaki puts his faith on the line, during an interview on 20/20 Brian Tamaki has enough courage to make statements like, "many New Zealanders are just waiting for someone to say this stuff." You could see the look on the reporters face, a sarcastic 'what a fruit loop' type of look. And Jonah was afraid of that look. Who isn't?

It's not fashionable to be thrown out on the fringes of society for what you believe. It's not cool to be given crackpot status because of your religion. Bigotry is alive and well—we just don't want to admit it as a society.

It takes about 1 month of solid walking to get to Nineveh from where Jonah was sitting on the beach. One month for him to think about the message that God have given him. One month to work out if he had the courage to do this.

The message was politically incorrect, fundamentalist and unpopular. “Tell that city that God is unhappy with their unrighteous and blatant disregard for him and his rule of life. In forty days he will destroy them all.”

Over the month the message became more and more succinct and abrasive. A kind of Chinese whispers effect took place inside Jonah’s head. This was only helped by the people who he met on the way who described what went on in Nineveh. And with every description that he heard, his stomach churned.

“Prostitution isn’t just legal, it is part of their religion! They go to the temple to have sex with strangers!”

“They sacrifice babies in that temple too. I can still hear the sudden halt of the baby boy’s crying followed by some eerie worshipful music. I can still see the brave face that the child’s mother forced on herself as they drove the dagger into her son’s heart before burning him.”

“Their king gloats how he had chopped off the hands of 200 captives and left them in the desert to fend for themselves.”

If Jonah had once despised the Assyrians who had Nineveh as the capital of their Empire, he absolutely hated them now. They were clearly the worst of the worst, the most disturbingly savage people of the world.

“I’m going to be a martyr,” thought Jonah. “So there’s no point holding back. I’d better make my life count.” He self talked himself into bravery. “I’ll tell them in no uncertain terms. I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. At least I’ll be remembered for telling them the truth before I die.”

After a month of walking and psyching himself up for his dreadful task, Jonah finally arrived at the outer gates of this massive city. He had been through all the emotions. All the stages of grief. He had meditated on the scripture and fought it out with God. Jonah was now mentally prepared for the ordeal that lay ahead of him.

Outside the city walls that were constructed to withstand the fiercest battle, there was an eerie silence. He saw inside the gate a mass of busyness but outside the world was peaceful and quiet. He went up to the gate pillar and etched a notch at the edge of a shadow cast by the sun. “Forty days from now,” he thought to himself.

He took a deep breath, straightened out his prophetic garb and began to walk into the place where God would judge.

Jonah walked for a day into the heart of the city. He walked past the brothels, the gambling halls, the massage parlours, the corrupt markets, the money lenders, the priests and priestesses of their national religion, the idols and the shrines, the vulgar peasants and the arrogant rich and the reckless military. They turned their noses at him, some shouted abuse, others would push him. They all knew that he was a Hebrew prophet, and they laughed and mocked.

“What do you want to say to us? Your religion means nothing to us! Your superstition is no better than ours! Your intolerance to us is terrible, go back to where you came from Christian. Don’t make a fool of yourself here.”

But this merely reinforced Jonah’s resolve to be a martyr. He was genuinely disgusted at what he saw.

“This is it,” he thought, “God help me.” He found a podium in one corner of a small square and prepared himself to speak. For all his faults, he knew how to preach!

“People, people, gather round and listen to words that speak of your destiny! Gather round and let me tell you some cosmic secrets.”

“People, people, come and listen to the purist truth you will ever hear. Listen to words that will haunt you for the rest of your lives!”

The crowd was abuzz with expectation. What could this mean? What is this great thing?

“Come,” he said with a smile, “Come, I have some wonderful news.”

“The time has come for your sadness to end! The time has come for your lives to be freed. Yes the time is near where you will understand existence at it’s simplest and most beautiful.”

And the crowd began to form. Just a small number at first but like a snowball waltz they all joined in at every new phrase.

And the the moment Jonah had been waiting for.

“Woe to you Nineveh! You are the worst type of city and God is distressed by your iniquity, your shameless acts of immorality, exploitation and violent disrespect for each other.

Woe to you, you sinners, for in 40 days you will all be destroyed by the wrath of a God who is most certain of your profanity!”

And the crowd was silent. Their jaws dropped.

“What does God have against you? Well, your proclivity for sexual expression is an abomination. Your turning women’s bodies into objects of sex, your turning the temple into a place of sanctioned immorality, your misguided belief that you can control God through prostitution have all led him to despise you. The Lord will see to it that you are dangled over the fiery furnace of hell much a like a small child dangles a spider over the fire.”

Not a word from the crowd. Not a single jeer.

“What does God have against you? Your lust for treasure, for status and for wealth, for job opportunity and worldly success is betraying your true character which reveals your small and insignificant estimation of your own self-worth. The Lord will crush you and humble you so that even your silk-lined but self-serving graves will not shield you from the grips of the devil and his demonic hoards.”

And still the crowd got bigger...this really wasn’t what Jonah expected, but he continued.

“What does God have against you? The way you embrace homosexuality with such alacrity and how you hold up your all-embracing, totally tolerant society with such high esteem, is an affront to the natural order of what it means to be God’s created image bearers, you are an abomination, you who have same sex relationships are distasteful to the Lord and he will spit you out as one spits out a insect that has flown into ones mouth.”

The crowd was now a throng. There were sounds of sobbing which turned into wailing. “He’s right,” someone shouted, “he’s absolutely right. This life that we are living is disconnected from the one and only true God.”

You’d think that would be the end of the story. The people repented, and saw God as being holy and wonderful and terrible and loving all at the same time. Sadly, the story continues, and it is the continuation that we find is the most timeless part of the story, with dull and unspoken echos with the church’s relationship to society today.

And Jonah looked at the crowd, who seemed to be listening. And he saw their distress. “Weeping won’t save you, it’s too late, for you have tested God to the end. You can’t escape God.”

Jonah got down from the podium, and made his way through the crowd, careful not to touch or be touched lest he be defiled by them. He went to another place and repeated his performance. In fact he went around the whole city for the next two days proclaiming the same message, and everywhere he went, the people were breaking down and weeping, genuinely sorry for what they had done.

He was astounded by the events that were taking place. Even the king had issued a decree, passed a law saying that they should all wear cloth made out of potato sacks, and sit in ashes, or pour ashes on their heads. They were to not eat anything as a sign of their commitment to their internal change. Make themselves humble before God. They would do anything to have God forgive them. For they were desperate.

“Well,” thought Jonah, “at least they’ll die knowing who their maker is.”

He stayed in the city for 39 days, watching as people mourned and grieved. “Silly sods,” Jonah thought, “they should be enjoying their last days alive . . .” On the fortieth day, Jonah got up and left the city. He walked out of the gates and stood about a kilometer away watching to see what God was about to unleash upon this sinful city.

He looked to the skies, he looked to the horizon. He tried to feel the beginnings of an earthquake. He looked to the hills, no column of smoke, no thunderclouds, no enemy armies. Every gust of wind made him think that this was it. But nothing happened.

Nothing.

He walked back to the gate and saw the mark on the post that he had made. He checked his little piece of wood and counted the markings on it, 39 plus today makes forty. He checked the etching, it was well and truly past the hour. The deadline had passed and there was no destruction.

Jonah was perplexed.

An eerie silence descended around him again until it dawned on him.

“No. Oh no, you’re kidding me. Oh that’s just great. Oh man. I didn’t sign up for this God! I knew this would happen. Man I’m stupid.

“God why do you do this?”

“I knew right from the beginning that you were like this and that this was going to happen.

You’ve shown your mercy time and time again throughout our history and now you’ve shown it again. Why did you make me proclaim their destruction if you were intending to forgive them? They’re vile, they deserve to die. You know that this repentance of theirs is only temporary. You know that they are only human and old habits die hard.

Oh come on God? What are you doing? Make an example of them. Kill them and show the world that you are boss. Come on, think of the difference it would make if people knew you were a god to be reckoned with?

But no, you want to come across all wimpy and nice with steadfast love, mercy and a readiness to relent from punishing.

This really sucks. There’s nothing worse than being a false prophet and that’s what you made me. I might as well die.

This stinks. This really stinks.”

Another eerie silence as Jonah sulked.

And God said, “Jonah, why are you angry? What right do you have to tell me how I should judge the world?” But Jonah ignored this and went out into the desert.

He climbed a hill to the east of Nineveh where he could get a really good view of the city. He made a hut out of whatever he could find and decided to wait for one of two things, either the city would be destroyed or he would die. Either way he felt he would be vindicated.

But the wind blew from the east, a hot and bothering wind and it blew the roof of the hut off leaving no shade from the sun and no shelter from the wind.

Jonah cursed under his breath and patted the sweat off his brow. “Well this really is the worst day of my life now.”

And here we have the strangest part of this entire story. The most peculiar ending I think to any book of the bible.

Jonah witnesses a miracle. He sees in front of him a tiny shoot sprout from the ground. At first he thought nothing of it, thinking he had just noticed it, but as he watched it, he noticed it was growing. And growing. And growing. He saw little bumps develop on the stem that turned into little branches. And it grew and it grew and it grew. I grew to full height and spread out above him with a beautiful canopy of leaves. It shielded him from the harsh light of the sun and became a place of quiet rest.

Jonah was amazed and thanked God for giving him this good thing. He smiled and fell asleep. He was exhausted with all that had happened.

When he woke the next morning he witnessed another miracle. The tree was no longer adorned with beautiful leaves and it no longer provided any shade. Some ferociously hungry caterpillars had gotten into the tree and devoured it.

The tree was dead and the horrible dry and dusty wind came in from the east to make him feel even more miserable.

Hot sun, hot wind, dead tree.

“God, you are so annoying. What do you want from me? Why didn’t you just let me drown instead of playing with my life like this huh? I’m sick of it.

“I thought I should die when I was thrown from the boat. But you saved me.

“I thought I should die when I preached your word in Nineveh, but those vile people listened and tried to embrace me and thank me.

“I thought I should die in the desert and you give me a plant to make my life happy. But now you kill the plant! Make up your mind. I’m sick of this.

“Life isn’t meant to be full of all these ups and downs, it’s meant to be simple. How come you are punishing me when all those people in that city have done far worse than me. I have kept all your commands except a couple, like when I ran away from you, but you understand why I did that. You were going to forgive them anyway, what was the point of me going there? What’s the point of any of this speaking out against the nations? What’s the point of being faithful when you just do what you want God?

“Why are you not blessing *me* and punishing the wicked?” He started to kick the dead tree. “Why are you punishing me God? Why me?”

There was that eerie silence that made Jonah very uncomfortable.

“Jonah, have you any right to be angry about the tree?”

Jonah replied, “Of course I do. It’s not fair how you are playing with me. I wish I were dead.

“I wish that I didn’t have to face the reality of living here on this earth. I wish I didn’t have to face this life where you only interact with the world on your terms, how and when you feel. I want you to do stuff now. There is a city of wicked people there who you should destroy. But instead you are out here toying with me. I don’t want to live if it means living with a God who is not black and white.

“People who sin, deserve to be punished, especially those types.”

“Jonah, getting back to the tree. You were concerned about that tree. You had nothing to do with how it grew. You didn’t nurture it. You didn’t look after it. It was a miracle. I did all that. Now you cared about a simple tree because it affected your existence. It meant something to you. And when it was destroyed you were upset.

“Think how I feel about destroying a city of 120,000 people who don’t know who I am. Most of them don’t even realise that they are doing wrong, they are going with the flow. These are people, Jonah, they are made in my image, I am the source of their life. I’m not interested in quickly destroying what I cherish. And every one of them Jonah, every single one of those people are people I love.

“You spoke my wrath, but you didn’t speak my mercy. Though I have shown you my mercy a number of times in this episode of your life. I forgave you when you ran from me. I punished you because you should have known better, and then I saved you in the belly of the fish—you yourself acknowledged that! And now you say it’s not worth living with me because I am not black and white enough for you?”

“Love is one big grey thing. Sometimes it overrides law. It looks at the true value of things and then makes a decision.

“Jonah, I love you which is why I saved you from death. But I also love dearly the people you despise. They are still sacred.”

There is a story in the gospel of John about a woman who was caught in adultery. There is no doubt about it. She was wrong and she knew it. Sleeping with a man who is not your husband was expressly condemned by law, but also by common sense. She deserved to be stoned according to the Old Testament law. There was a crowd that was ready to kill her. And the spirit of Jonah reared his ugly head there again. He was in all of those who had a rock at the ready, who were eager to see punishment for her sin.

Jonah is alive and well in every generation. Jonah who reduced people, God’s creation, God’s image bearers into ‘sinners’ and was eager to see the cause and effect of divine justice take place. Eager to throw that stone at the woman who was cowering in fear at the feet of Jesus.

God’s chosen people, exposing their own hypocrisy as they wanted to make themselves feel and look better by reducing someone else to being not human but a sinner. Their vanity was their justice, their wounded egos were their inspiration. They would love to act out God’s wrath because it would for a moment let them feel like they weren’t as bad as that person.

Jonah? Jonah in this congregation, I am a sinner, will you throw a stone at me? Or out there, will you throw your stone at the homosexual? The drunkard? The wealthy? The angry short man? The bitter spinster? The old and grumpy man? The woman who has an abortion? The man who elects for euthanasia? The woman who works in a brothel? The man who kills someone while speeding? The child who gives you the fingers for no reason? The politician who supports something you disagree with? The racist little girl? The violent man who beats his wife? The paedophile? The thief? The womaniser, the seductress, the man who likes guns? The man who rapes? The man who murders to be one of the gang? The woman who spits on her husband? The adulterous? The workaholic? The masturbator? The discourteous? The arrogant? The war mongerer? The vain? The pathetic? The unemployed? The beneficiary? The immigrants?

Are they sinners that we should throw stones at? Or are they recipients of the love of a God who created them in his image and still gives them the right to live because he loves them dearly too?

Let's put down our stones, and lay Jonah to rest.

We are the same as them. But we claim to know the grace of God. Let's live it as we take communion.