

The book of Jonah has long been a favourite story for Schools and Sunday School. It's cartoon like nature lends itself to dramatic storytelling and artwork.

Once I started asking myself more critical questions about scripture, I began to puzzle over exactly what this small book, tucked away among the minor prophets, was really about.

The Psalms are songs and poetry. Isaiah and Jeremiah and the like are works of prophecy. Other books record historical events. What is the book of Jonah?

Jonah was a real person and was one of those counted as a prophet, declaring God's purpose and intention; whether people wanted to hear it or not. Although the bible records all manner of extra-ordinary events Jonah stands out as exceptional. (*at the Primary school we have had the stories of Joseph leading on into Moses – so...interpreting dreams, plagues and miracles, crossing the Red-Sea on dry land.*) However, you cannot beat being swallowed by a fish and being thrown up three days later!!!

- Jonah receives a command to go and preach to the one place he doesn't want to go, to the one people he doesn't want to be saved. He hates the Ninevites.
- He runs away from God and the boat he gets on enters a terrible storm and all are likely to die.
- He offers himself as a sacrifice (*as it's all his fault*) and the storm miraculously ends and the sailors worship God and make vows to him.

- At the point of death, Jonah is rescued by a fish and after a time of prayer is vomited on dry land.
- He eventually goes to Nineveh and preaches the message that God will smite them from the earth unless they repent. And they all repent!
- Finally the story ends with a strange tale of a miraculous vine that grows up in a day to give shade and equally miraculously is destroyed by a worm.

What is this story???

A scholarly article I read offers the solution that this story is an Old Testament parable told by Jonah himself, with himself as the main character.

If there were real events around which he weaved the story, so much the better – but rather than get stuck on whether or not he was inside a whale...there are other truths to learn.

Jonah has told the story in such a way that his crisis moment is sustained over three days inside a fish. The prayer he offers is more eloquent and thoughtful than ours might be, in fact it's a Psalm.

I believe that most people pray and they pray at a moment of crisis. It may simply be they say "Oh God" because that is something they say all the time. Or they might form a longer sentence "Oh God please let....." and add in their heartfelt wish.

Let my child live.
Let my loved one's escape.
Let this tragedy be averted.

In a moment of crisis we don't have much time to pray, and a lack of experience in prayer leads to the most basic and heartfelt of cries. "Oh God".

In the Jonah story, the prayer is a well written Psalm of thanksgiving and quite unlike the sort of prayer we would

Praying the Lord's Prayer

utter in a moment of panic and crisis. The more familiar you are with Psalms, the more likely you are to pray like a Psalm.

God has answered Jonah and rescued him. When he deserves nothing having turned away from God, his cry is heard and he is saved.

In verse 5 he is sinking into the deep. The weeds are wrapping around him and he is down at the roots of the mountain.

Which might well describe how any of us feel when a problem grows and grows and swamps us. The details of it and the calls to be made and the paperwork and the various strands of the problem can all wrap themselves around us like weeds around the head.

In distress we cry out to God – save me. He hears our cry.

In Jonah's reflection on his life and situation, he has come to realise that relying on worthless idols will get you precisely nowhere and he makes this declaration of faith. Deliverance belongs to the Lord.

We like to be self sufficient and independent. Perhaps that's our idol – I don't need God. We like to be on top of problem solving and be in charge of our own destiny. Jonah's story is very extreme but it highlights the situation all can experience, that when we turn away from God and follow our own course the day the disaster comes we realise our folly and cry out to God – Oh God, save me. The new Testament version would be the parable of the prodigal son. When he came to his senses he decided to return home and say, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

When I was preaching about the line in the Lord's Prayer, and lead us not into temptation, I said that the best time to be dealing with temptation is before we are tempted, just as the best time to fix the roof is in the summer and before the winter storms. When all is well we tend to get complacent.

Having a habit of prayer and being disciplined about prayer stands us in good stead when a crisis comes. Our familiarity with prayer allows us to draw closer to God and express ourselves more fully.

The Lord's prayer as a simple template as well as a liturgical prayer is the answer...we have no need to re-invent how to pray.

The Lord's prayer reminds us that God is "Our Father" and all that follows is spoken to a perfect good good father. Whatever we might think about God, Jesus reveals what our Heavenly Father is really like...like the father running down the road as the prodigal son returns, welcoming and embracing. This is who we pray to.

Before getting into our requests and needs...we should pause to honour and worship our Father God – hallowed be your name. Jane preached on this and I've been making a conscious attempt to include sentences of worship before launching into requests.

And the next line – "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" reminds us that we are called into God's Kingdom where He is Sovereign. This sentence reminds us that heading in the wrong direction, like Jonah – is not going to work out well.

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Let's seek God's will in every situation. How might every situation serve God's purpose?

Then the template allows us to get life ordered.

Give us – and here we can ask.

Forgive us – and here we can get right with God and one another.

Lead us – and here we can consider where we are heading

Deliver us...here we can ask protection.

And then as we end, we are encouraged to see that our lives, whether in crisis, or troubled, or joyful and wonderful, can be a means of bringing glory to God. It's His kingdom, his power and his glory...so let this situation, whatever we are facing be a means of bringing glory to God.

I'm fairly certain there will be someone listening feeling guilty because they don't pray very often, or even at all. That is up to now.

Adopt a new habit – pray the Lord's prayer.

And those who do pray daily...include the Lord's prayer.

And those who pray daily and include the Lord's prayer you do get a gold star...but as we heard earlier in our series, keep it simple, keep it real and keep it up.