Jonah - a Whale of a Story?

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Nevertheless prolonged silence can suggest non-existence, just as when the stream of greetings cards from a distant friend suddenly dries up and we are forced to conclude that they may have died. Perhaps we should prune our language of metaphors by which we say God speaks, walks, repents. After all, when we say that God has spoken, aren't we at risk of investing our own longings and hopes with divine legitimacy?

When we read that Adam and Eve heard 'the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden', we're in the territory of metaphor and picture, for the obvious reason that God does not have a body. But perhaps speaking doesn't depend on vocal chords in the way that walking depends upon feet? Speaking doesn't imply the means by which it is done but only the intention to communicate. Humans use vocal cords but it's quite possible to imagine communication through direct mental influence on another. God could speak as directly and unmistakably as you or I, without the need for vocal chords. It's a central theme of the Bible that he does. Sometimes he speaks through other voices but he may also speak directly, even occasionally, audibly.

It may, then, be sensible after all, and without doing violence to language, to join with the biblical witnesses, in declaring that God can speak directly. But our questioning persists, why is God so economical in speech? Is it the price God elects to pay to safeguard our creaturely freedom and responsibility? Or is his speech too consuming so as to be used sparingly at the critical points in our lives and events? Or is God's speech longing to be incarnated, seen, felt, touched as well as heard? As R. S. Thomas puts it: 'We call him the dumb God, with an effrontery beyond pardon. Whose silence so eloquent as his? What word so explosive as that one Palestinian word with the endlessness of its fallout?'

If that line of enquiry is exhausted, perhaps we might reckon that it is the hearer rather than the source who is deficient. Perhaps God's speech confronts a people who, like Samuel, do not know the Lord and therefore cannot recognize his voice. After all, as Jesus said, it is only his sheep who hear his voice. We're told God persisted in calling Samuel but to no avail. It was only his wayward guardian Eli who eventually realized that Samuel was being called by God. It is other people, notably the community of faith, but sometimes the worldly-wise like Eli, who persuade us that God is speaking to us. The account is laced with irony: Samuel needs Eli to identify God's voice because Eli's misdeeds have deprived Samuel of the experience of hearing God already. But in identifying God's word, Eli opens the way for Samuel to hear a word of God that brings notice to Eli of the downfall of his own family.

God spoke but Samuel did not recognize the voice. Yet he was in an environment of attentiveness, in the temple, in close company with an experienced interpreter of God's ways. Today our attention span is negligible, interference is high, the activity of listening can be indefinitely postponed, with the help of recorders, and meanwhile we switch restlessly from channel to channel for instant and undemanding communication. Orchestras and pianos have, over recent years, been tuned to produce a brighter sound in order to satisfy contemporary concertgoers. Even church congregations can find it hard to cope with more than a brief silence in worship. The reluctance to listen and the concern to fill every silence with a cacophony of sound, masks an emptiness that we feel ill-equipped to face. Are we then ready for the attentiveness in which we may hear God's voice? Can we bring ourselves to say with Samuel: 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'?

If we do we may discover that God calls us, putting our manicured lives into crisis. We can be sure that he will dislodge our hiding places of shame, denial and avoidance that make us captive to our past. He will fast-forward the work of transformation in us but yet this will be a stage in the journey towards maturity in Christ on which we had already embarked. We can, if we dare, say 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'.

January 26th – The Third Sunday of Epiphany

JONAH – A WHALE OF A STORY?

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Jonah 3:1–5, 10

There is a much-told story in Church circles about the Bishop of London who one day went to visit the great actor Edwin Booth, and asked him how it was that he could fill his theatre eight times a week while he, the bishop, could only muster a scant crowd once

a week. And Mr Booth is reputed to have answered 'Bishop, it's because you take truth and make it sound like fiction, while I take fiction and make it sound like truth'.

This is where we are with the book of Jonah. Despite the attempts of those who try to prove that human beings can live perfectly happily within the digestive system of any number of large fish, it is clear that we are dealing here with a work of fiction. But like great stories often are it is full of truths that we need seriously to listen to. Harry Emerson Fosdick says of it, 'It is one of the supremely important books, not only of all Old Testament but of all ancient literature'. So as has been said it's more a whale of a story than a story about a whale.

The story is simplicity itself. Jonah hears a request from God to warn the inhabitants of Nineveh to repent if they do not wish to face destruction. These are the very people who caused Israel's exile in the first place. Rather than deliver the message Jonah takes a ship as far in the other direction as he can get. But God sends a storm. Jonah is thrown overboard and ends up in the belly of a great fish, which takes him off and spews him up at the very place God originally sent him to.

A second time God speaks to Jonah, 'Get up, go to Nineveh that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you'. And the city repented, much it must be said to Jonah's horror. It seems that Jonah has too limited a view of God. For him God's love ought to be limited to Israel, he has to learn that it is unlimited – there for all.

We are here looking in on a great debate. Having returned from exile Israel faced the question of what kind of nation they were to be. For many the obvious reaction to a hostile and threatening world was a policy of narrow exclusivity. Racial and religious purity must be preserved. Mixed marriages were outlawed. Ezra even demanded that Jews who had non-Jewish wives and children must send them away. 'The holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the land' (Ezra 9:2). There was a lust for vengeance. 'On that day I will make the clans of Judah like a blazing pot on a pile of wood . . . and they shall devour to the right and the left all the surrounding peoples' (Zechariah 12:6). The same mood is found in terrible passages in the book of Esther with its picture of a slaughter when 'The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them' (Esther 9:5). The first reaction was a fierce nationalism.

But there was another response. The Book of Ruth took as its heroine a Moabite woman, a foreigner, and an alien in the land – and showed how love and human relationships are more important than racial barriers. And in this context the author of Jonah tells his story. Israel has a universal mission, to preach God's message to the world, and the folly and the wickedness of Israel's reluctance to share the divine spirit and purpose. 'Go to Nineveh, that great city.' What Israel has to understand is that God's compassion is not just a compassion for Israel but for all; she must be a light to Gentiles. God doesn't go in for narrow nationalisms. God is concerned about everyone! Nationalistic bigots will quickly find that they are on the other side from God.

If this is an ancient story it is also a modern one. The limiting of love to our kind and the anathematizing of others are still one response to racial and religious difference. Examples are everywhere. After one bomb attack in Israel a mob of Jewish settlers set about driving Palestinians from the homes where their families had lived for generations. One Jewish woman, her face contorted with hate said 'There are 20 Arab countries – let them go and live in one of them – this is all ours'. In the same mood the mother of a Palestinian suicide bomber has spoken of her pride at her son's attack on an ice cream parlour in Tel Aviv. Before he struck, her 18-year-old son Jihad called her in a Palestinian refugee camp to say farewell . . . 'I said, "Oh, son, I hope your operation will succeed."' The blast killed a 56-year-old Israeli woman and her 18-month-old granddaughter. Several dozen bystanders were wounded, including five children – among them a toddler.

Or come close to home in Ireland. Simply walk around Belfast. Still Protestant and Catholic areas are festooned with tribal symbols – the Union Jack and the Irish tricolour flown on lamp-posts and houses to demarcate denominational allegiance. Within a few hundred yards of the city centre there are murals of hooded gunmen proudly painted on walls. Ironically there are also Palestinian and Israeli flags flying, each sectarian community identifying themselves with factions in the other conflict. One hate attracting another. Jonah would have been happy in an Orange march and found like-minded bigots on the Falls Road.

There can be a terrible narrow darkness within the human spirit. But there is a liberating word from God. For Jonah the word of the Lord is 'Go to Nineveh, that great city'. The love of God is not limited to one community or to one race. In this moment of insight Jonah looks ahead to the Gospel which says 'There is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free, for you are all one in Jesus Christ'. God made us one, Christ died to keep us one, and we have to live as one.

As Jonah eventually came to see, marvellous things do happen when we make the trip to Nineveh. Let me tell you a true story. In June of 1865, having surrendered his army of North Virginia only a couple of months before, Robert E. Lee was in Richmond, the old Confederate capital. The air was still electric with tension. Richmond was still occupied by federal troops. It had recently been subject to a cruel siege, defeat, looting and burning. Its citizens were bitter with humiliation and apprehensive about the large number of blacks who had been freed by the war. It was communion Sunday at St Paul's Church and when the minister was ready to serve the communicants, a tall, well-dressed black man was first to go to the rail. It was a shock to all the whites. To them it was nothing more than arrogance, another attempt to force change on them. For a few moments nobody moved. Then another man came forward and knelt not far from the black man and the other man was Robert E. Lee. The effect, said a man who was there, was magical, and the service proceeded without any further difficulty.

Whatever the barriers of exclusivity we are held in by, whatever the antagonisms we nurse, the word of God is always to 'Go to Nineveh, that great city'. That's how we break into the new world to which God is inviting us.

For Reference

R. N. and R. K. Soulen (eds.), *A Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002. £12.99. pp. 234. ISBN 0–664–22314–1).

This third edition is a revised and expanded version of an already successful standard reference book. Originally designed to provide basic information for students, its most recent expansion includes 'a variety of postmodern and postcritical perspectives, not to mention a renewed interest in precritical approaches to the Bible'. Indeed, the entries bearing the prefix 'post' make for particularly interesting reading: postcolonial, postcritical and postmodern interpretation. Other delights include articles on deconstruction, intertextuality, structuralism, semiotics, reception theory and reader response criticism. Although there is no single entry on 'precritical biblical interpretation', there are articles on Origen and Jerome, for example, but surprisingly not Augustine. The work is more than a handbook for students learning to make sense of a complex field. It also offers a pleasant and refreshing browse for those trying to keep up with developments or to look beyond the narrow field of their own specialism. There are over 800 entries, and basic bibliographies are supplied.

THE EDITOR

Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002. £30 (hbk). pp. 654. ISBN 0–664–22409–1).

A comprehensive guide to the subject embracing almost 3,000 entries, this book represents a notable achievement. The term 'evangelicalism' is not without its difficulties. 'Evangelical' is defined in the book in terms of belief in 'the centrality of the "conversion" or "being born again" experience' and 'taking the Bible seriously' (i.e., literally). Although the author's task is essentially descriptive, he recognises that he will appear 'latitudinarian' in the eyes of some readers. Others will be astonished at the narrowness of the views in question. Yet what is being described is undoubtedly 'the (American) culture's dominant folk religion', involving the 'lived tradition' of over 40 per cent of the population. As such, it is a potent political force, yet significantly there is no entry on 'politics'. It nurtures and expresses the strongest views on selected moral issues, yet there is no entry on 'ethics'. Nevertheless, this book is to be commended as an excellent guide to this overwhelmingly American phenomenon, which has also repercussions in the wider world.

THE EDITOR