

When I think of Old Testament stories which are popular as children's stories, I think there are four which are particularly good. They give an interesting story, opportunities to use some good pictures, and even some nice tie-in craft. First of all, we have the story of creation: God saying, "let there be light" and there was light, God separating the waters from the earth, the fish and the birds and the animals, and so on, and finally people. We can learn about God's creative power, and how good God's creation (including all of us) is supposed to be.

The second is the story of Noah – well, it's the story of Noah's Ark and the flood, because Noah's story is generally cut-down for a younger audience. We can learn about what went wrong with creation – and how God's grace is such that he has a plan to save creation. We can have pictures and props of the animals coming two by two (even though it's not quite that simple). Noah's Ark is even an unmistakable cultural icon – a double ended boat, with a cabin on the deck, a couple of giraffes sticking out.

I think the third story is that of David and Goliath. How God uses the small to overcome the powerful. How faith in God is greater than the mightiest, most monstrous enemy. Except we'll leave out that bit of the story when David grabs the Philistine's sword and hacks off Goliath's head with it.

And the fourth Old Testament story that we like to share with children is the story of Jonah, the story which we've had part of in this morning's reading. The children's edition of story of Jonah has important lessons for us: We should do what God says, and if we don't do what God says, bad things will happen – but God will find a way to bring us back, and when we do what God says, everything will work out okay. And there's great visuals: Jonah running, the sailors becoming angry and throwing Jonah overboard. Of course, there's plenty of scope for discussions about what sort of fish it was that swallowed Jonah and speculation about whether it was a whale, not a fish anyway.

And that's all true, of course, but there's more to the story of Jonah – the whole book of Jonah in the bible.

The story so far, when we arrive at the reading that John brought us this morning, is probably familiar to you:

Nineveh, one of the great cities of the Assyrians, had fallen under the judgment of God because of their wickedness. We don't know the specific charges, but we know from other parts of the Bible and from other historical sources that the Assyrians were a brutal people. They were a threat to all their enemies, including, of course, the nation of Israel.

God appointed a prophet named Jonah to go to Nineveh in Assyria and deliver his message. In the second verse of the book of Jonah in, God says: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

Jonah didn't think that was a good idea – or at least, he didn't think it was a good idea for him. In the very next verse we read "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish."

He boarded a ship in Joppa, and set sail, but a violent storm came up and threatened to break up the ship. And Jonah realised he was the cause of the problem.

He [told them], "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. ... Pick me up and throw me into the sea...and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." (Jonah 1:9,12)

The crew didn't immediately want to throw him overboard, but eventually we can read that "Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him." (Jonah 1:15-16).

And then, in the final verse of the first chapter we learn: Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:17).

And somehow, from inside that fish, Jonah prayed. He prayed the prayer I used in our prayer of confession this morning (Jonah 2:2-9). And then, the last verse of chapter 2 tells us "And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land." (Jonah 2:10)

And then at the opening of today's reading, we heard that "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."" (Jonah 3:1-2)

I don't think that his mind had been changed about going to Nineveh and proclaiming God's word there being a bad idea... but he certainly thought it was better than being caught in a storm, thrown overboard, swallowed by a fish, and vomited onto a beach. So, this time, Jonah set out for Nineveh.

And Nineveh was a big place. Far bigger than Jerusalem, it seems. We read that it took Jonah three days to go through it. That's big. I haven't tested it, but my phone tells me that it would take me just over four hours to walk from here to the Sydney GPO.

But Jonah was preaching as he went - Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown". That's a pretty short sermon. No nice context, no humorous story, no three points. It's more like "Repent for the end is nigh!", except Jonah doesn't outright preach the 'Repent' part... it's just "The end is nigh!".

His full message may well have been longer, of course, but "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown" is all that is recorded.

Jonah's message was simple: "overthrown" is the same Hebrew verb used for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) – so complete destruction. Implied in Jonah's message is hope, though. Hope that what he's saying will happen, won't happen. If... if they stop being wicked. If they repent. If they change. If they just listen to what Jonah is saying.

And they did!

Verse five tells us "The Ninevites believed God." They believed! Message received and understood. It's interesting, I think, that it's not that they "believed Jonah", but they "believed God". Although it was Jonah preaching, it was God's word.

But the people of Nineveh did more than sampling believing – they took Jonah's message to heart, and they acted on it. They understood the end was nigh (if they kept going in their wicked ways), so they repented. They acted on their belief. And they humbled themselves before God.

A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. The tradition was that people would fast and wear sackcloth to show mourning. In fact, even into modern times, penitent sinners wear sackcloth.

Should we? You can decide for yourself, but for me, the answer is, “No... but”. ‘No’, because we don’t need to, ‘but’ because we need to humble ourselves, and we need to admit our wrongdoings. We need to put aside our own pride.

You know the modern form of the political or business apology that begins “I’m sorry if I caused offence”, “I’m sorry if I hurt anyone” and so on? It’s almost placing the burden on the person offended or hurt.

I’m sorry that I offended you. I shouldn’t have done that. I did the wrong thing. Let me do what I can to make things right.

Let’s put our own pride, our own dignity aside. When it’s appropriate, let’s put on whatever the equivalent of sackcloth for us. Because it seems that sometimes it’s case of ‘how can we get out of this the easiest way we can whilst maintaining our dignity’.

But whatever form our repentance – or I guess in more common language ‘our change for the better’ takes, it is absolutely necessary. The letter to the Hebrews (10:26-27) says “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”.

Yikes. But note that the author said, “If we deliberately kept on sinning.” The author spoke, not of someone who does the wrong thing from time to time (as I think we all do), but of someone who intentionally continues to live in wrongdoing.

The Ninevites understood repentance was necessary when Jonah preached God’s word to them.

They were regretful of how they’d been living. They showed they were sorry for what they’d done and how they were living. They proclaimed a fast and wore sackcloth to show their sorrow.

And again, repentance is more than simply being sorry, but repentance does start with sorrow – sorrow for what we’ve done to others, what we’ve done to creation and – most of all – what we’ve done to God. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” (2 Cor 7:10). Godly sorrow that is sorrow you got caught, or sorrow that you have to pay a penalty, instead, it’s sorrow you have gone against the will of God.

That sounds pretty extreme, but ultimately all our wrongdoings – our sins – are sins against God. God doesn’t want us to hurt each other, God doesn’t want us to hurt creation and God doesn’t want us to hurt ourselves. So every sin, goes against what God wants. What God wants for each of us, for all of us, and for the world.

To go back to the story of Noah, we read in Genesis chapter 6, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually [...] and it grieved him to his heart.” (Gen 6:5-6).

If grieved God’s heart.

And that’s how it is with us too – when we do the wrong thing, it grieves God’s heart.

When Jonah decided to run to Tarshish, it grieved God’s heart.

And despite all we do wrong, God provides the way back. Not by us being swallowed by a great fish.

But more dramatically: By sending his son into the fallen creation to die for us!

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:6). “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3).

Because the Ninevites repented, God didn’t bring disaster on them. The final verse of our Old Testament reading tells us “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.”

I think that’s a great assurance. It’s never too late. Ninevah, amongst all the cities of the ancient world, had earned God’s wrath... but they believed God, they repented, and they were saved. Whatever it was that they’d done, individually and collectively (and I think we can safely say it was pretty bad stuff) was forgiven.

When we turn to God, when we turn away from the ways of the world, we are forgiven to. Paul wrote to the Romans (6:11) “you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”. We’re dead to sin. And alive to God in Jesus.

When Jesus rescued the woman caught in adultery from the Pharisees and the scribes who were going to stone her, he didn’t just save her – he forgave her as well, and he also called her to repent “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:11).

Forgiveness is hard. Forgiveness is costly – our forgiveness cost Jesus his life. And forgiveness can be hard to accept. Hard to accept for the forgiven, and hard to accept for others.

People sometimes say, “I know that God forgives me, but I could never forgive myself”, but CS Lewis addressed that idea when he wrote “I think that if God forgives us we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise it is like setting ourselves up as a higher tribunal than him”

And sometimes its hard to see others forgiven. We, as humans, like to see justice done. We like to see wrongdoing punished. Righteous vengeance can feel pretty good.

And as we move into the next and last chapter of Jonah, we see that Jonah himself wasn’t happy with the Ninevites being forgiven. God had a lesson for Jonah, though... but interestingly the book leaves Jonah’s unsaid.

The story of Jonah is more than a children’s story about a man being swallowed by a fish. It’s only a short book, but I think as we read it and take it to heart, we learn about people... whether the wicked people of Ninevah, the superstitious crew of the ship, or Jonah... and we learn about ourselves – do we realise that we need to repent? That we need to humble ourselves? And we learn about God: God who is powerful – but God who is also loving, and patient and kind. Loving of Jonah, the Ninevites, and of each one of us.

Amen