

A Missionary God

Intro

A few years ago the Church of England issued a fairly banal statement encouraging Christians to evangelise. In response, the *Guardian* commissioned a series of short essays, asking whether religions should seek to convert others, entitling the discussion: *Should Religions Compete?* All three respondents basically concluded—with a fair bit of nuance it should be said—no, they should not. One of the responses began as follows: *Throughout history religious factions have competed with each other, and their reasons are often dressed up as being for the good of the people, or for the honour of God. In truth, though, competition is usually about gaining or maintaining power for the purpose of the survival and growth of a community. Religions have therefore competed for land, for money, for sacred sites, for political power, and for the loyalty of their communities.* The author goes on to argue, given Christ's message of self-sacrifice: *Although common sense suggests that a group that doesn't fight for its own survival may die out, when a religious group does begin to compete for power, it begins to compromise the heart of its own message.* -In sum, to be a missionary seeking to convert others, is deeply unfashionable and problematic.

—As Christians, I think we can come to a similar conclusions. A friend of mine recently spoke to me about his time in Christian ministries as an Undergard. His feeling of constant pressure to 'get out there' and evangelise. He almost expressed a sense of being used for the sake of propagating a certain vision.

—When we talk about mission, I notice a sense of exhaustion and of discouragement in perpetual failure.

Exposition

The book of Jonah is one of the more artfully constructed sections of scripture, it inverts our expectations about who is saved and who is lost, asking us to question the way we approach mission and evangelism.

The story begins with a prophet in his prime. This prophet named Jonah is mentioned one other time in scripture, in 2 Kings 14, and he gets to do what prophets nearly never do. To deliver good news. He tells King Jeroboam of Israel that God wants him to expand the borders of Israel, and he does. Many imagine that Jonah is by now a sort of celebrated prophet, an honoured preacher. Likewise, there are indications later in the book that he is financially well off. We might imagine him today as a regal bishop in the house of Lords.

—To Jonah, the word of the Lord came and said “*Arise, go to Nineveh.*” Arise is a common way in which God commissions his prophets throughout the OT. It is to grant a commission and a vocation.

—And he is sent to Ninevah, to the Assyrians, to a nation renowned for its violence. Even Assyrian religion was deeply implicated in their violence and empire building. Inscribed on one of the temples in praise of the God *Ashur*, is a description of the high king of the Assyrians. It tells the story of how a king of the Assyrians, overcome with the glory of Ashur, lays siege to a city, and when the nobles came out and beg for peace, he strikes them down, flaying off their skins, spreading their bloody remains over the city walls or erecting them on stakes. This is a brutal, pagan empire with a religion which glories in brutality. The prophet Nahum tells of the destruction of Ninevah, and pictures the nations clapping their hands at the vicious Empire's downfall.

—So we have, from the beginning of the book of Jonah, the sharpest of contrasts: the celebrated prophet of Israel, the servant of God, on the one hand; and the brutal, violent, pagan world represented by the Assyrian empire on the other. Yet everything that proceeds as the book unfolds subverts this contrast.

Remember what God said, **Arise**. Calling Job up to this vocation, but instead of arising:

*He **went down** to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and **went down** into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.* 1:3-4. A terrible storm arises, and all the sailors are terrified, but Jonah had **gone down** into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep 1:5. The text is connecting the prophet's vocation to arise as a witness, to a vision of sacred space. In the Psalms, one goes up to the dwelling place of God, to seek the face of the Lord, where his presence resides, in the heights of the temple in Jerusalem. And therefore to 'go down,' is to move away from his presence. The point: by forsaking his calling to be a witness, Jonah 'goes down' away from the presence of the Lord. In his flight from the pagans, Jonah is in fact not merely fleeing from them, but more fundamentally, he is fleeing from the presence of the Lord. Fleeing from God himself.

And then what happens: *The captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? **Arise**, call out to your god!* 1:6. The pagan captain unknowingly and unintentionally repeats the words of Yahweh himself! He

calls Jonah to Arise and to pray. One commentator fittingly calls this chapter, **the World's Rebuke of the Church**.

Explain: Everything in Jonah 1 is meant to reverse our expectations.

—Who is the one who is lost? It is Jonah himself. It is the missionary who needs saving. And how do we see that, how do we see just how *lost* he is? By contrasting him with the pagans. There is a Jewish sort of extrapolation on this text, which says that there were 70 sailors, representing the 70 nations on earth. In the story, the sailors serve to represent the pagan nations of the world, yet continually they are represented as more receptive to the Word of the Lord, then Jonah the Lord's prophet.

—The narrator is intent to show that the sailors are humane and deeply pious, by contrast with Jonah who is self-absorbed, and self-deluded.

—The sailors struggle to preserve the ship through the storm, Jonah sleeps.

—The sailors do all they can to preserve life, Jonah remains silent, hoping not to be noticed.

—The sailors cry out to God reflexively, Jonah must be forced to pray, and in chapter 2, where we hear the psalm or hymn telling us of what happens when Jonah turns to God for salvation. Jonah finally says: "*With the voice of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!*" Jonah's final turning to the Lord results in: sacrifices and vows. The very things we are told in chapter 1 the sailors have already done. v16 *the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.*

At every turn, the narrator is pressing a conclusion upon us. He is reversing our initial expectations of who is lost and who needs saving. **This is the world's rebuke of the church.**

—What does this tell us about why God appointed Jonah as a missionary? And why does he keep insisting that Jonah fulfil this calling? Why does he, as the text say "hurl a storm" at Jonah, and then, why does he, as it says, "appoint" or "arrange for" this great fish" to rescue him from the deep? Why is God so insistent that Jonah be his witness? It is because of God's burning love for Jonah. God pursues Jonah across the Mediterranean to the ends of the earth, not because God does *needs* Jonah for his missionary endeavours! Jonah is the worst evangelist in history, and the story proves this point, by God's converting of everyone around him despite his best efforts to do otherwise. You would never invite Jonah to speak at CU events week. Look at his missionary tactics, "*St. Andrews will burn to the ground in the fire of the Lord's judgment. End of message. Enjoy the music.*" What the whole book of Jonah is pressing home, again and again: God doesn't need Jonah, God himself is the missionary God, and not only is he pursuing the Pagans with his loving-kindness, but *most of all* he is pursuing Jonah himself. He has called Jonah to this missionary vocation, because in the missionary task, Jonah himself will come to seek God's face, to **arise**—at last—to the presence of the Lord.

Answering the Question

Let's return to our initial questions, why does God call us to his mission? And is mission, or being a witness, a competition, a difficult task we are forced to complete to win as many people to our team as possible?

—I got a pint with one of my old friends this past week who is not a Christian, and found myself immediately asking, 'How do I deal with the fact that you are so much more ethical than I? You are more concerned than I am about what's going on in the world today in terms of justice. You are more radical in your self-criticism, and your willingness to call into question your own life choices for the sake of your convictions?' Jonah leads us to think this is exactly what we should expect. We should expect to learn something of God's goodness, of his loving-kindness, in the face of those who are seemingly the farthest from God.

How does Jonah change both our Christian understanding of mission? And the caricature of conversion in the secular world?

1. **Being sent on God's mission is not primarily about the people you are sent to. It's about you.** It's about finding God's presence in the midst of our vocation as witnesses to his goodness and loving-kindness. It is about your experiencing the goodness and faithfulness of God. It is about being further converted to his way. —As an aside, 'Why is mission so discouraging?' Because we think that it is first and foremost about 'them,' not about us. We think they are the lost and we are the found, rather than seeing mission as about ourselves, seeking to be united to the heart of this missionary God, who treats not only *them* but *us* with endless compassion and who promises to meet us, particularly, when we view all aspects of life as an opportunity to be his witnesses. ANECDOTE: Do you ever have someone who really wants to help you, but by letting them help you it actually costs you a great deal? We do this with children, but also with

adults. Becky says when I do the laundry, I have put her clothes away in the wrong place for the last three years, but she still lets me help, more for the sake of our relationship than because I make her task easier. Mission is God letting us 'help' him, for our own sake.

2. **Mission is not about having the better answers, or being the better person.** Nothing convinces me more of Justification by faith alone, and by grace alone, than the missionary task. When Martin Luther the church reformer died, there was found by his bedside a scrap of paper, on which was scrawled, *Wir sein Pettler, Hoc est Verum*. "We are beggars, That is true." We don't want people to turn into us, to become like us or to join our team. We turn people away from ourselves, to the bread of life. We do not cease being beggars when we meet Jesus. A great conceit of Christianity is that now that we are Christians, we have all the answers. We do not. We have encountered a great mystery when we come to know the grace of God in Jesus Christ, for it is in him that all things hold together. But in participating in God's mission, in being appointed as his witness, we meet the mystery of Christ in new and profound ways, even in the lives of those who don't know him, and we find ourselves convicted, and convinced again and again that we are more of a beggar than we ever would have thought.
3. Finally what does mission look like? What's the missional strategy? Jonah does one good thing. It is not an act of brilliant moral self-effacement, he has to be dragged to kicking and screaming by the Pagans to this act. It is not an act of rhetorical or intellectual brilliance. It is an act, of begrudging, but genuine self-sacrificial love for the other. When he says: "*Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you.*" v12

And in this act, we encounter a moment in which a cluster of OT images come together to a single point. —We have a scapegoat: a ritual in which a die is cast and one goat is banished from the people, sent out into the darkness of the wilderness taking the sins of the people with him. And here in Jonah, we see lots cast, and one who is thrown out into the darkness, for the sake of the nations. —We have the over-powering and terrifying image of the sea, which crops up again and again, particularly in the Pentateuch. The sea is the forces of chaos, destruction, and death, the forces of de-creation threatening to swallow up life itself, it is to this which Jonah gives himself. —And we also have, as chapter 2 tells us, the image of the grave, as the sea to which Jonah is thrown is compared to death itself, to the 'belly of Sheol', the shadowy underworld of the dead.

Yet in the depth of despair, we hear Jonah say: "*when my life was wasting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple... Salvation belongs to the Lord!*" Jonah 2:7-9. Salvation belongs to the Lord. Yahweh saves. Yahweh yeshua. And the Angel comes to Mary, and says: *You shall call his name Jesus*, (what in Hebrew would be yeshua) *for he will save his people from their sins.* Matt 1:21

—As the men stand beneath the cross casting lots, we see another scapegoat, condemned to go out into the darkness for the sins of the world.—We see, as he breaths his last, the forces of de-creation, the chaos of the dark sea, unleashed in all their fearsome power upon his body. —And as he is buried in the grave, we see the immortal, confronted with morality, we see the one who has life in and of himself, submit himself to the power of the grave, to the yawning mouth of Sheol. As Augustine says: *As Jonah passed from the ship to the belly of the whale, so Christ passed from the cross to the grave, or into the abyss of death. And as Jonah suffered for the sake of those endangered by the storm, so Christ suffered for the sake of those tossed on the waves of this world.* Jonah, despite his radical failings, had this one moment of loving self-sacrifice, for the sake of the Pagan world. And Christ in the gospels identifies himself with Jonah. Saying that in this one single moment, in this single act of self-sacrificial love—despite all of his other failings—Jonah participated in God's own love for the world. It was there, hid in the watery abyss, that he was nearest to the blinding light of Jesus Christ's compassion. Jesus's mode of mission, is self-sacrificial love, and when we join him, we experience the face of God.

In, *Surprised by Joy*, the story of CS Lewis's conversion, he says: "*I had always wanted, above all things, not to be interfered with. I had wanted (mad wish) to call my soul my own.... And you must picture me alone in that room ... night after night, feeling, the steady, unrelenting approach of him whom I earnestly desired not to meet.*"—When we refuse to participate in God's mission, when we refuse sacrifice—to change our schedule, to adjust our lifestyle, to reevaluate the way we approach our careers, or our home groups or discipleship groups, or our churches, or our even of families—when we, like Jonah, just want to be left alone, we are not fleeing from the 'pagans', but from God. Because God is present with us, as the crucified Messiah, who gave himself as a ransom for the nations. In calling us to participate in his mission, he calls us to experience his loving-kindness. In calling us to mission, he still pursues us, seeking again our deliverance.