

In his very act of rebellion Jonah still serves the Lord. This is difficult for us to get a grip on. The book of Jonah is short and sweet and full of twists and turns. First he flees, reluctant to preach salvation to his mortal enemies, the people of Nineveh, but there's no escape from the Lord. A great storm arises and although Jonah sleeps it is not from a quiet conscience but from a false sense of relief that he has escaped the Lord's call. Not a bit of it, and the sailors, knowing his story and respecting his God in a way he has failed to, wake him in order that he may call upon his God to save them. Jonah realises the game is up and offers himself as bait, one might say, and is cast into the sea only to be saved by God in the belly of a large fish – though of course it might not seem like salvation to Jonah at the time. This large fish later re-presented as a whale, vomits Jonah onto the shore and God once again orders him to Nineveh. Jonah obeys though not with any goodwill as the subsequent story of the wilting plant will tell. He preaches God's warning of imminent destruction and is upset that the people of Nineveh pay heed and are saved.

There is an alarming parallel to this today in Israel which has been tasked with teaching salvation to the world, to be the light to the nations – which it is clearly failing to do. If you think this is a prejudice on my part, listen to this prayer read on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, in the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain after the reading of the Book of Jonah, read also on this day throughout the world

“Lord, you are revealed in the story of Jonah, and we relate it's meaning to ourselves, for Nineveh is the repentant world, and we are Israel, its unwilling prophet. You have chosen us to know you and to love you, and this knowledge is our glory, and this love is our burden.... such knowledge is too wonderful for us. By it you reveal our kinship to friend and foe, our duty to those who love us and to those who hate us; our task in a world where everything and everyone is Your work. If we are not for others we are not for Israel. It is for us to bring the prisoner freedom, to give the homeless refuge and the starving food. It is for us to sow the seed of friendship on unfriendly soil, to reconcile enemies, and bring redemption to our oppressors....Your command is beyond all calculation.”

(Yom Kippur Afternoon Service Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship. Vol 111 Prayers for the High Holidays (London 1985) page 551)

Not a hint of revenge there. And this task is ours too, adopted children of the same God, called like Jonah and the simple fishermen in today's gospel to act as bait to catch all God's people in the net of God's love. Indeed, the whale is God. There's no escape. We are saved in the belly of a whale – though it might not seem like salvation at the time.

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