

**Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!**

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**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> June 2020 – Prayer (4) – “A prayer of Desperation”**

**Introduction**

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port: Chalmers Memorial Church.

If you've been following these podcasts in recent weeks, then you'll know that we are now at the 4<sup>th</sup> of 6 reflections on the subject of prayer. Now, we've not been doing that by thinking about how it is that we should pray. We've not even been looking at techniques for prayer or the sort of words that we should use. I am sure that there is a place for looking at prayer in those ways. However, instead of getting weighed down in the detail we have, instead, been looking at some stories in the Bible in which famous people of faith actually pray.

Where do they pray? What is happening to them when they pray? What does their prayer tell us about their relationship with God? What lessons can they teach us that might help us in our faith life?

Daniel for example, whom we thought about a couple weeks back, prays even more fervently when he is told not to pray to God. His prayer is one of defiance.

King Solomon, who was at the centre of our thoughts last week, prayed when he dedicates his magnificent new Temple to God. In his prayer he not only gives to God the work of human hands, but he also recognises that God is so big that even this huge edifice is not – and never will be – enough to contain him.

This week we turn to another Old Testament character, that of Jonah who, as we discover him this week, prays when he – after running away from God – finds himself in the belly of a great big fish!

We will discover, in a moment or two, what he says and the intensity with which he says it but first of all shall we pray?

**Let us pray...**

**Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer**

From the quietness of our dwelling places, loving God, we come into your presence this day and as we do so we bring with us all the events of our lives... our cares and concerns... the things which make us weary as well as the things which inspire us and we lay them at your feet trusting in you.

We bring the people that we are... our failings and our weakness and we come before you, in peace, to be renewed and inspired.

We come confessing the things in our lives which hold us back – our indecisiveness one moment followed in another moment by a seeming disregard for caution.

We confess a sometimes uplifting view of the world but equally the moments in which we have become jaded and disillusioned with it and, somehow, we seek for you to take all of these things and to help us move into a closer and deeper relationship with you.

We know that we cannot do that by ourselves. We know that, on our own, we are not likely to be able to bring ourselves into a right relationship with you and that is why we place who we are and our daily concerns – our doubts and our self-doubts – and invite you to make us your people once again.

As we worship you this day, enable us to trust in you and when our worship is over may this time have strengthened us in our continuing service of you.

Hear our prayers, therefore, as we bring them to you in Jesus' name and in the words he has taught us to say, saying:

*Our Father*

*who art in heaven*

*Hallowed be thy name*

*Thy kingdom come*

*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread*

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power*

*and the glory, for ever, Amen.*

### **Bible Reading – Jonah Chapter 1 verse 17 to chapter 2 verse 10**

*Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. 2 He said:*

*'In my distress I called to the Lord,*

*and he answered me.*

*From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,*

*and you listened to my cry.*

*3 You hurled me into the depths,*

*into the very heart of the seas,*

*and the currents swirled about me;*

*all your waves and breakers*

*swept over me.*

*4 I said, "I have been banished*

*from your sight;*

*yet I will look again*

*towards your holy temple."*

*5 The engulfing waters threatened me,*

*the deep surrounded me;*

*seaweed was wrapped around my head.*

6 *To the roots of the mountains I sank down;*

*the earth beneath barred me in for ever.*

*But you, Lord my God,*

*brought my life up from the pit.*

7 *'When my life was ebbing away,*

*I remembered you, Lord,*

*and my prayer rose to you,*

*to your holy temple.*

8 *'Those who cling to worthless idols*

*turn away from God's love for them.*

9 *But I, with shouts of grateful praise,*

*will sacrifice to you.*

*What I have vowed I will make good.*

*I will say, "Salvation comes from the Lord."*

10 *And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.*

**Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.**

### Reflection

I am tempted to say yuck! We're pretty much with Jonah while he is inside the big fish... we're getting along just fine with his prayer but then the storyteller spares no squeamishness. If Jonah is going to get out of the guts of that fish, then there is really only one way that that is going to happen.

In other words, whatever method he got in there by is really the only method by which he is going to come out again. It just all sounds a bit gruesome... a bit yucky... and it all is, and it's supposed to be that way.

The storyteller needs us to get the idea that what Jonah is facing at this point in his life isn't ideal.... In fact, far from ideal.

Now, before we come to his great prayer from the belly of the fish, it is probably worth pointing out, and for us to accept, that different folk have different attitudes and views about Jonah.

Some, for example, see him as a bit of a wimp... a man who cannot face the reality of what God is asking him to do – to go and preach to the people of Nineveh which was not, we should remember, in Israel but rather in the neighbouring Assyrian empire. Assyria was the sworn enemy of Israel. Ah, but God asked him to preach there and so, the argument goes, he should have gone. He should have trusted God more!

Others might take a different angle though. Ok, so Jonah runs away but let's not act as if we might not have pulled back just at the point when we realise the awesome nature of what might just happen should we follow instructions. For all Jonah knows he might have trodden his first

steps onto Assyrian land and hardly have made it another 100 yards so much would his life have been in danger.

Which is just another way of saying – and this is probably where I tend to sit on the matter – that what Jonah does is a pretty good example of what fear can make people behave like.

Here's how one preacher puts it: *“Jonah is my kind of missionary (he says). Reluctant, withdrawn, stubborn. Never quite ready to go to Nineveh. All over the Bible, people are getting up and going. Abraham and Sarah move out on a promise and a prayer. Moses heads for Egypt with nothing but a shepherd's crook and Aaron to write his sermons. Elijah stands defiant, facing four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. But not Jonah. Jonah (he concludes) stands on the dock with tickets for Tarshish”.*

Some call him a raving nationalist for not wanting to cross that border into Assyria. So thirled to his own land is Jonah, they say, that he doesn't want anything to do with any other lands.

Perhaps more correctly, however, Jonah is just a man who has become afraid... fearful and when fear hits it has the habit of meaning that, if we don't have the option of simply staying where we are, of sending us in the other direction instead.

So, Jonah buys tickets for Tarshish instead of Nineveh and, as we discover, the boat he travels on finds itself in the middle of a great big storm... a storm that threatened to overturn the boat if the sailors in charge cannot find a way to keep themselves safe.

They start throwing everything overboard in an attempt to steady the boat – but it makes no difference at all.

This leads them to the collective decision that something or someone on that boat must be causing this storm and, after casting lots, they come to the conclusion that it must be Jonah who is to blame.

By that point, even Jonah is beginning to agree with them. He too suspects that the storm raging around them is pretty much caused by him and that's when Jonah asks them to do what he feels is the only thing they can do – to throw him overboard. Surely, when he is not on that boat, the storm will stop.

To cut a long story short that is what they do. They do not want to throw him overboard. They even pray for mercy as they do so but over he goes, as we discover at verse 17 of chapter 1, when all of sudden – as Jonah sinks to the bottom of the old briny a great big fish comes along and swallows him up whole.

Just at the point when Jonah is facing his final demise he is somehow, for the time being, saved.

Now, how well timed was that?

In the Douglas Adams novel, *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the central character Arthur Dent find himself saved by his friend Ford Prefect when an alien species known as the Vogons – in a great big space ship – destroy planet earth to make way for an inter galactic space highway. Ford Prefect, we discover, is an alien too and he manages to hitch a ride for them both on one of the Vagon destroyers.

There is a point here – which is coming soon! To cut a long story short, the Vogons capture both Arthur and Ford and eject them off their spaceship into the dark of space itself. Doomed to a near certain death in outer space, however, they are saved by another random spaceship that just happens to be passing their bit of space at the same time.

Just, we might say, like a big fish appears just when Jonah needs it... and a bit like James Bond always being there just at the right time to hear the baddies confess to their crimes... or Superman happens to be flying over Metropolis city when someone is in need of rescuing...

Coincidence? A mere accident of timing? A sheer fluke?

Hmmm...

Are we so sure? It's easy to write this off as such... one of those random things that happens once in a million years but that is not what the storyteller seems to be telling us here. God has not finished with Jonah, it seems, and if it takes the inside of a big fish to become a portable storage place for a while – gruesome as it might seem – then that was what was needed.

And in that sense, it's just like every other experience in our life where something seemingly random has happened... like every time when we wrote something off as mere chance... when, in fact, as we looked back we might have begun to reflect that what we once said was an act of sheer improbability actually turns out to be the way God has chosen to work... to answer our prayers... to address our needs... or to take care of someone we love...

How was it, we wonder, that things worked out as they did?

As we look back on our lives, how many times have we stood at the docks with Jonah with our tickets for Tarshish in our hands and yet, despite our attempts at a detour or an avoidance with reality, we end up somewhere completely different – even when there is not a big fish, or even a passing spaceship, in sight.

*“My times are in your hands”*, says the Psalmist at Psalm 31.

Or what about the words of Psalm 139, a Psalm of confidence in the presence of God for everyone who is trying to flee from God's sight, just like Jonah was...

*“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast”*.

*Even on the far side of the sea...* I love that... and I can only imagine that that is exactly what is going on in Jonah's mind as he clings to life inside of that big fish.

*“In my distress I called to the Lord and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help and he answered me”*, prays Jonah at verse 2 of our reading.

Just as the Psalmist also prays in similar vein at Psalm 130, *“Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice.”*

By this time Jonah is humbled by his experience and so, aware that whatever is happening to him that God's hand is surely to be found here, that he proclaims his profound belief that one day – as we find at verse 4 of our reading – that he will be able to look again at the wonders of the Temple... the very temple which Solomon dedicated in prayer in the story we looked at last week.

Not that every sentiment that Jonah expresses here is equally magnanimous or tender. Before he ends his prayer there is a bit of a jibe at those who worship false gods and who cling to worthless idols – which pretty much was just about all the sailors on the boat who threw him overboard as well as the Assyrians to whom he was being sent.

Ok – so Jonah gets it but he’s not quite there yet. But God still hears his prayer and just at that point the big fish... well, we’ll not go there... it isn’t a pretty sight... and I might just say “yuck” again!

It’s a unique answer to prayer, to say the least. At the same time, it’s also the answer to prayer that sets Jonah on the path that fear stopped him from walking on in the first place. If he can survive a dodgy journey on a boat and a few days inside a big fish, then Assyria really wasn’t a step too far to walk.

Having had his prayers answered it was time now to buy tickets for Nineveh – at last.

**Let us pray.**

### Closing Prayer

Lord, we are thankful for the story of Jonah who reminds us that we all have moments in our lives where we are fearful of taking on new challenges and facing new opportunities and we do indeed confess that so very often we have been found at the docks alongside Jonah clinging onto our tickets to Tarshish rather than to Nineveh.

And yet, we rejoice that you saved Jonah when he got himself into such a terrible mess and that, even from the inside of a big fish, that you heard his cry and redeemed him.

Lord, we pray this day for those of us – and those in our world – who have known a fear which has prevented them and us from fulfilling our potential as we should. Whilst you understand our fears and those things which hold us back, we ask that you would take those fears away so that we might journey with you to new places.

We pray this day, too, for those who feel as trapped as Jonah was in the belly of that big fish – those who sense a lack of freedom in their lives to pursue their dreams or who live with destructive relationships which hamper their physical and emotional freedom as well as those who live in a cycle of addiction which was supposed to bring freedom but which has brought only a sense of being further enclosed.

Lord, whoever it is – and for whatever reason - that some may feel trapped in their lives may you touch them with compassion. Help them to sense that your love for them offers a new way to live and the courage to make the decisions – hard as they are – that they need to make.

Again, we pray, as we do each week, for those who are not well this day – whether at home or in hospital. These have been difficult days for so many. As the cry of your people goes out – just as the cry of Jonah went out – may the voices of those in need be heard.

Hear our prayers then as we bring them to you in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, Amen.

### Benediction

*May God lead us out into the world with renewed vigour, hope and faith. May he direct our sense of purpose so that we live and work for him.*

*And may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you and with all whom you love this day and forevermore, Amen*