,Jonah 3:10-4:11

I expect that most of you know the story of Jonah and the whale, but here is a quick summary to remind you.

In Chapter 1 Jonah is called by God to go and preach repentance to the city of Nineveh.  Jonah thinks that isn’t the best plan for his life, so he hops on a boat going 2000 miles in the opposite direction.  God reminds Jonah of what he asked him to do by nearly sinking the boat he is on with a great storm.  The sailors throw Jonah overboard to save their own lives, and Chapter 1 closes with a great big fish swallowing Jonah.

In Chapter 2 Jonah talks with God in prayer from inside the fish, and at the close of the chapter the fish vomits Jonah onto dry land.  In Chapter 3 Jonah makes his way to Nineveh, where he walks up and down the streets preaching a simple message – “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”  Nineveh hears this warning, and the entire city repents from the king down to the livestock.

And that brings us to today’s reading, Chapter 4 of the book of Jonah.  To the bit which doesn’t usually turn up in the children’s Bible story books.

Jonah is angry. Angry with God. It seems like an odd response. God has just rescued an entire city from destruction, from their sinfulness.  What would’ve been the proper response?  Praise the Lord!  Praise the Lord!!  perhaps?  But rather than praising God, Jonah is angry.

Jonah is angry because he hates the people of Nineveh, but he knew all along that God would save them. Jonah knows all too well how many times God’s people have turned their backs on God, and how many times God has given them another second chance.  Jonah’s God is the God of second chances.  He knew God would give the people of Nineveh a second chance too.

Jonah is so angry in fact that he says that he’d rather be dead than live in a world where his enemies are followers of Yahweh, followers of God, and where his God is merciful to his enemies.  Here we see Jonah’s true colours really come out.  This hatred, this bigotry against the Ninevites has been seeping out throughout the story, but here it is plain and clear.  In verse 5 we see Jonah still holding out hope that God will judge Nineveh for their sins, or that maybe they’ll backslide on their repentance.  He leaves the city and sets up camp where he can hopefully watch God destroy his enemies.

And so the Lord decides to teach Jonah a lesson, using a bush.

This is the desert – modern day Iran – so there aren’t a whole lot of trees or places to find shade.  And it is hot.  Out of nowhere a huge bush springs up, so big that it provides shade to Jonah, and he sees it as a blessing from God.  He couldn’t be more wrong, because the next day God then provides a worm, which chews the bush so that it withers and dies.

God sends the bush, not as a blessing, but as a way to get Jonah’s attention.  The bush is a way for God to remind Jonah of his sovereignty – that God is in charge and in control.  We’ve seen this earlier in this story haven’t we?  God sent the great storm and nearly killed Jonah and the sailors in an attempt to get Jonah’s attention.  Does Jonah learn his lesson this time?  No. Rather than admitting that he is wrong, that God, and not he is in control, rather than changing his ways and repenting, he says again that he would rather die than give up on his anger.

And so the story of Jonah ends, ending in a form of tragedy.  On the surface it appears that we have no resolution to this story. However, it seems likely that Jonah himself is the author of the book, and so this suggests that Jonah did, at some point after this story, give up on his anger.  If Jonah had remained unrepentant, he would have written this story quite differently, leaving out the bad stuff, the stuff pointing to his own stubborn proud self.

But, as it stands, Jonah’s story stands both as a warning to us, and as a testament to God’s goodness.

We all can be consumed by anger and hatred. We can all be selfish and proud.  As St Paul reminds us in Romans 3, *we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* We all need God’s grace, his unconditional love, and his forgiveness. It is very easy to fall into the trap which Jonah fell into, that is to think that there is something about us which makes us closer to God, or more eligible for his love and forgiveness than other people. In Jonah’s day, God’s people didn’t want to share their God with the gentile nations. St Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2 tells of a similar attitude amongst the Jews in the early church who are trying to *keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.* And, lest we are tempted to become self-righteous about this, this is still something which we need to guard against today.

Let me finish by taking you back to the story of Jonathan Aitken, a story which many of you will probably remember. Again, on the face of it, an unlikely person for God to save, just as Nineveh was. But a reminder that our God too is the God of second chances.

[Jonathan Aitken](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/aitken) is a former Conservative cabinet minister who became a Christian while serving a prison sentence for perjury in 1999 after lying on oath in a libel case against the Guardian.

He says that he encountered scepticism about his conversion to [Christianity](https://www.theguardian.com/world/christianity). “In a different era,” he says “I’d have been one of the cynics myself. If I’d had a parliamentary colleague who’d got into trouble, gone to jail and come out saying, ‘I’ve found God’, I’d have said, ‘Oh, how very convenient for him’.”

Jonathan Aitken was in fact was ordained priest in 2019 and now works as a chaplain at Pentonville Prison. He commented “18 years ago, I think if they’d had any sense, the Church of England would have rejected me. Remember what a hot potato I was – going through this downward spiral of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail – so I don’t think they’d have been queuing up to have me as a curate.”

So, here today, are we willing to accept that God can and does save the most unlikely people? He saved the people of Nineveh, he saved St Paul, who reminds us in 1 Timothy that *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.* He saved Jonathan Aitken. And are we willing, as Jonah sadly was not, to say Praise the Lord!  Praise the Lord!!? when this happens, however threatening or confusing or unsettling this might be for us?

Let me leave you with the words of Jesus himself in the parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15

*I tell you that there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*

Amen