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Jonah and the Great Fish

Jonah 1:1–4:11 · Harvest · Adults

Jonah is a short book with a sharp edge. It is less about a fish than about a man who knew exactly what God is like and did not want him to be that way.

Context: Jonah son of Amittai prophesied in the northern kingdom in the 700s BC (2 Kgs 14:25). Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, whose armies flattened cities and deported whole populations; in 722 BC they destroyed the northern kingdom itself. Sending an Israelite prophet to offer Nineveh a chance to repent is like asking a survivor to preach to his persecutors.

The story: Jonah flees by ship toward Tarshish. God sends a storm after him; the pagan crew pray harder than the prophet does and end up worshiping the Lord. Thrown overboard at his own request, Jonah is swallowed by a great fish and prays a psalm of thanksgiving from inside it (Jon 2). Back on land and sent again, he gives a one-line warning, and the most unlikely city on earth repents, from the king in ashes to the cattle. God spares it. Jonah's response is the theological center of the book: he says he ran because he knew God's heart: God would rather pardon than punish, and Jonah would rather die than watch him do it. God gives him a shade plant, takes it away, and asks whether Jonah's grief over

a plant gives God no right to grieve over a city. The book ends on that question, unanswered, which leaves the answer to the reader.

The Church's reading: God reveals his power above all in forgiving (CCC 270) and wants no one lost (CCC 1058; 1037). Conversion begins in the heart and then shows itself in fasting, prayer and changed behavior (CCC 1430–1431; 1434). Jesus calls himself "greater than Jonah" and makes Jonah's three days a sign of his own death and Resurrection (CCC 590; 994; Mt 12:39–41). Many Catholic scholars read the book as an inspired teaching story rather than a chronicle; the Church has not defined its form (CCC 110).

For adult life:

Running from a call. Vocation, a hard conversation, a needed apology: most of us have bought a ticket to Tarshish. Jonah shows that God's pursuit is persistent and, surprisingly, gentle; he gives the same job a second time.

Resenting mercy. The older brother in the parable of the prodigal son has the same complaint (Lk 15:28–30). It is possible to believe in a merciful God and still be angry when that mercy reaches an ex-spouse, a parent who failed us, or a political enemy. Forgiving enemies is where Christian prayer is tested (CCC 2844).

Prayer from the depths. Jonah's best prayer comes from the worst place he has ever been.

A Catholic resource: St. Faustina Kowalska, canonized in 2000, spent her short life spreading devotion to God's mercy, and the Church keeps Divine Mercy Sunday on the Sunday after Easter. The sacrament of Reconciliation is that mercy in person (CCC 1468).

A real-life step: name the person you would least like God to forgive, and pray for them by name once a day this week. Then consider going to confession yourself.

Church teaching note

Church teaching: God's power shown in forgiving (CCC 270); God wills that none be lost (CCC 1058, 1037); conversion of heart and its signs (CCC 1430–1431, 1434); 'greater than Jonah' and the sign of Jonah (CCC 590, 994); forgiveness of enemies (CCC 2844); Reconciliation (CCC 1468); literary forms (CCC 110). Assyria and 722 BC are historical context. St. Faustina Kowalska (canonized 30 April 2000) is offered as a saint; the revelations associated with her are private revelation, which does not add to the deposit of faith (CCC 67). Divine Mercy Sunday is the name St. John Paul II gave to the Second Sunday of Easter in 2000. Lk 15:28–30 is a cross-reference outside the retold passage.

Talk about it

1. Where is your Tarshish, the direction you go when you'd rather not do what God asks?
2. Jonah knew God was merciful and resented it. Whose forgiveness would be hardest for you to accept?
3. Why do you think the book ends with God's question instead of Jonah's answer?
4. Catholic connection: read CCC 2844 on forgiving enemies. What would it cost you?

Key verse: Jon 4:2. Look it up in your Bible.