

20260920 A drop in the ocean

Jonah 3.10-end of 4

How do you get two whales in a car? Start in England and then head west.

The eccentric and Christian comedian, Milton Jones.

Jonah, is a fabulous book and it's very short and very funny. Milton Jones wrote an introduction for a commentary book on Jonah, though I've long since lost my copy.

Jonah is best known for his unfortunate episode in the big fish, even Jesus quotes from Jonah.¹

Jonah is a religious bigot, he is grumpy, and is so full of self-righteous indignation that he is prepared to shout it all back to God. At least he prays, that is something.

¹ Luke 11.30

His mission is to go to the people of Ninevah to tell them they need to change their ways otherwise, disaster will come. Nope, nope, not about that, Jonah doesn't wanna go. God ever asked you to do something you don't want to do?

So first Jonah runs away, gets on a boat to head in the opposite direction to where he was directed by God, then comes a life-threatening storm, he gets chunked overboard, the big fish swallows Jonah and 3 days later, it spews him up on the land.

Jonah begrudgingly walks around the city proclaiming the barest of proclamations 'Forty days more and Ninevah will be overthrown!'² And remarkably, the people believe and repent, turning away from their wickedness, whatever that was.

² Jonah 3.4

Jonah is furious, furious with God for his mercy, for his steadfast love. He's so mad he wants to die.

Jonah and the whale bit is the memorable part though in the last section, there is another great image.

In his righteous anger, Jonah sits under a bush, this brings him some shade from the sun. Jonah is happy about this.

And then, the bush is attacked by some sort of worm, I don't know, larvae, the east wind comes, the sun beats down, the bush withers, Jonah is thoroughly cheesed off now.

You'd think as a prophet he would be delighted that his God-given mission had been a success, no, he wanted to see them suffering and die, he didn't want them to repent.

He's delighted with the bush and acts like a toddler, screaming it's not fair. It's not fair that the bush perished, I want to die.

Jonah was concerned about the bush only because it created shade for him.

He doesn't care about the thousands of people in the city, nor the animals. They are just an amorphous mass; he hates them, they mean nothing to him.

Jonah is confident that his worldview is the right one, he is fully confident of what is fair and right, his expectations are correct, he certainly does not want to see a more loving and generous outcome for these people.

Then his contentment is ruined when the bush dies and that is only because it had utility.

We're taught that our worldview is right, our expectations should be met and that bushes have value if they have some use to us. We

humans have been living this religion, from the day we're born we are consumers in the marketplace. The earth, living creatures, trees, rivers, rocks, elements, they are valued if they are useful to us as some form of resource or for our pleasure.

Even within faith, some strands of Christianity shape us to believe it is all about us and our salvation, the ultimate destination is heaven, the earth is merely the vehicle to get there. The earth serves us.

Earlier this year, as Churches Together, Madela and David organised a showing of the People's Emergency Briefing. This is a film that has been put together from a conference back in November last year with a panel of leading experts to set out the evidence on the climate and nature crisis in a formal briefing to national decision-makers. It is a call to action.

On their website their vision states this film was commissioned in response to a simple but profound democratic principle: people should be trusted with the truth about major risks that affect their lives.

God demands that we look at things differently. And like Jonah, we might want to run away because we cannot face the bad news, we'd rather not know. Or we realise God is demanding we review our worldview through the lens of his justice and mercy.

This summer's awful heatwave desiccated much of my garden, some beloved plants could not survive the intense heat. Whilst we were away, Tom had been left with watering instructions for the greenhouse and veg patch. Even without green fingers, he could see plants suffering in the rest of the garden and he'd throw some water on them but he didn't know what to do to help. Yes, I was sad but looking

over my own small boundary to the wider world, fires were raging in France, Spain and now getting closer, here in the UK, devastating Dunwich Heath and the Cairngorms.

And then in Nepal, 1,400 people have died while 6,150 people remain missing in the floods following the glacier collapse ³

If we dare to look, do we see doctors, teachers, mums, kids, chefs, emergency workers, or do we see an amorphous mass of brown people? Like Jonah and the Ninevites caring little of their plight.

There was "absolutely no doubt that human-induced climate change played a role here in the preconditioning of the disaster", said Dr Friederike Otto, an Imperial College London climatologist who co-authored the study by the research group World Weather Attribution.⁴

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly464k252yo>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cmlyrzve5pwzo>

Jonah's ethics are not God's ethics, and neither should they be ours. Even the fires in the UK threatening human safety, there is the loss of wildlife habitats, we can hear God saying, 'and also the many animals?' Not because they serve us but they have their own intrinsic worth.

God created this amazing world, it is our home and it has its own value, not as an endless resource for us humans. What kind of enormous fish crisis will we need to look at what we are running away from? Just as he did with Jonah, God demands that we look at things differently.

We can easily think that our efforts amount to very little.

In the book 'Cloud Atlas' is this, "And for What, For What. No matter what you do it will never amount to anything but a single drop in a limitless ocean. What is an ocean but a

multitude of drops.” Hold that drop in your hand.

From the Peoples Emergency Briefing, history suggests that societies are more resilient when people are trusted with the truth.⁵

Human beings are capable of extraordinary wisdom, creativity and cooperation - but usually only when we engage honestly with reality, and with one another.⁶

Jonah had to do this on his own, we don't, we have each other.

The last thing I want to do is preach at you from some weird moral perfection that you know I am not. This is about conversation and dialogue, not pointing fingers at others or throwing mud, but looking at ourselves and

⁵ <https://www.nebriefing.org/vision>

⁶ <https://www.nebriefing.org/vision>

what that next drop in the beautiful, life-giving ocean would be.

Paul and I have had honest conversations about this, we've discussed travel, food, clothing, shopping, repairing, the pulpit isn't the appropriate place to share this though I'm happy to chat another time.

Some of you might be thinking what can I do at my age? Is God still in your heart and you're still here? Then God's calling you to look, look at the world, prayer as the breeding ground for action.

In the People's Emergency Briefing, Lieutenant General Richard Nugee states a saying they have a saying in the army, 'face the threat that is in front of you, not the threat as you would wish it to be.'⁷

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3Z8Atre2rE>

Remember the two whales in the car? What seems impossible and yet remember the words from the Peoples Emergency Briefing, Human beings are capable of extraordinary wisdom, creativity and cooperation - but usually only when we engage honestly with reality, and with one another.⁸

Individual moral perfection is not the goal, it is engaging with the questions of life and think how exciting that could be, to be advocating a different story.

How cool would it be to be in conversation with your grandchildren, to be their inspiration? I certainly don't think it's fair to put all the change responsibility on them, like we had nothing to do with climate change, pollution, habitat loss and inequality.

What could this look like?

⁸ <https://www.nebriefing.org/vision>

Sharing your sewing skills, so clothes are repaired rather than thrown away.

Going vegetarian once a week, or more.

Supporting a charity, or leaving a gift in your will for tree planting.

And without being morally pious, we can share our stories with each other to be encouragers.

Each one of us is a drop in the ocean, but what an ocean. We are a multitude of drops in the ocean of life-giving water of this amazing earth we are given the privilege of living with.