

## Jonah 2:9

### Salvation comes from the LORD

I don't know if it is just me or my family but life seems to be getting busier and busier

- One of the things I always used to like doing at the start of the Christmas holidays
- Was to trawl through the TV guide making sure that I did not miss anything
- Now I understand those people who say there is precious little to miss on TV
- But nevertheless, the only thing I can say about my Christmas TV guide
- Is that I never looked at it
- Perhaps it is this growing sense of busyness in life that made the BBC 2 series 'The Monastery', featuring the life of Worth Abbey, such a popular programme

Worth Abbey is a Benedictine monastery in Sussex, the Abbot is Christopher Jamison

- who recently wrote an article, 'I'm not spiritual but I am religious'
- with a title like that I am surprised that I bothered to read it at all
- I would more readily have read, 'I'm not religious but I am spiritual'
- But I want you to listen to my quick summary of what Abbot Jamison wrote

Abbot Jamison has come to the conclusion that 'I'm not religious but I am spiritual'

- Now seems to be a normative self-description for most people in Britain
- But the growth of spirituality is simply acclaimed as self-evident with no definition
- Billy Graham filled Wembley Stadium and invited people to give their lives to Jesus
- Since 1977 the Mind Body Spirit Fair has been filling exhibition halls with suppliers
- Offering produces from tarot to Hopi ear candles to eastern wisdom
- It's not so much religion as spirituality which is the opium of the people today
- There is now a commercially driven spiritual market place
- With consumers seeking to develop the non-material side of their lives
- Often summed up in a desire for peace of mind and quest for meaning
- Peace and insight being the features that new spirituality movements seek to offer
- Asian religion outside of Asia (Buddhism, Hinduism) has come out of it pretty well
- A search for peace through eastern religious fragments
- is summed up well by one book that puts forward 'Taoist healing methods ...
- with an added pinch of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shamanism, Humanism', all offered as
- 'the perfect antidote to depression, deprivation, fear, loneliness, grief, grudges'.
- All religions are assumed to share a common core ... we all have spiritual experiences
- And we sophisticated westerners can do spirituality and morality without religion
- So, says Abbot Jamison

The challenge for those of us who are religious is to offer the whole of our religion to those spiritual seekers who are currently living on a reduced spiritual diet ... The insubstantial diet of spirituality is often self-regarding and avoids the hard truths that religion offers.

There are parts of the article with which I disagree but I think the Abbot is on to something

- Many of us have used 'religious' to contrast with spiritual vitality
- But we must beware of the irreligious pick-and-mix spirituality
- That dismantles or even lacks a framework of doctrine, ethics and commitment

The first Methodist Covenant Service was held in 1755

- Most Methodist Church in Britain hold an annual Covenant Service
- At which we celebrate all that God has done for us
- And affirm that we give our lives and choices to God
- The Covenant prayer embraces the whole of our life, in all its parts
- Most people find it quite tough to say and really mean it
- For most of us being able to make our own decisions and choose our own path
- Is very important – in the prayer we are effectively saying we give that over to God
- One of my colleagues in South Wales has written:

Why do we hesitate to say the words of the Covenant prayer? Perhaps, because it translates being a Christian from a vague commitment to Christ to something very specific; we want to follow him in general, not in particular. Perhaps, we only partly want to obey God's will and keep parts of our lives to ourselves; perhaps we have failed in the past, and do not want to be dependent on God's forgiveness of our past and his power for our future. It is because of our hesitation that we need to make this very particular response. Discipleship is sometimes dramatic, sometimes ordinary, but always specific ... It is seeing life in God's way and living in his Spirit.

In order to explore the Biblical basis of this relationship, I want us to look at Jonah

- With particular reference to what we might call the 'Psalm' that forms Chapter 2
- It is normally taken for granted that the historical truth of Jonah cannot be defended
- But there is no evidence that any rabbi doubted that it was a true story
- And the Lord Jesus referred to the story of Jonah as something obviously historical
- A more recent trend has been to show that a man could survive inside a great fish
- And, indeed, Jesus himself put the story alongside the miracle of his resurrection

God called Jonah to preach at Nineveh, capital city of Assyria, enemy of Israel

- So far as we know, Jonah was not chosen because he was particularly suited for this
- And when Jonah went in the opposite direction, God could have used someone else
- It is just a modern superstition that a believer is indispensable or irreplaceable

Jonah took flight on a ship headed for Tarshish but when a violent storm arose

- The sailors, probably Phoenicians, cast lots to find out who was responsible
- And the lot fell upon Jonah – Jonah claimed that his God, the God of heaven
- Was creator of the sea and of the land
- And that the sea was not just left over from the primeval chaos
- When the sailors asked what they should do, Jonah said to throw him overboard
- Realising that would be the equivalent to murdering him, they tried to put him ashore
- Unable to do so, they prayed that they should not be held guilty of Jonah's death
- When Jonah splashed in the sea, though immediately calm it was still a place of peril
- The power of God ensured that the fish was there at exactly the right time
- God did not provide a piece of floating wreckage to float Jonah to the nearby shore
- But a fish, as a sign of the forthcoming greater resurrection

It was a time for Jonah to learn that God's love is operating

- In a world ultimately under divine control, however hostile it might seem
- There is no reason to believe that Jonah was swallowed immediately
- Chance is that he was half-drowned before he was swallowed
- There is no mention of the fish in his prayer
- Suggesting that he hardly knew what changed the wet darkness of the sea
- Into the dry darkness that he experienced inside the fish – an absolute darkness
- But he came to realise that this all-enveloping darkness was mysteriously safe
- In praise to God, Jonah offers this Psalm of thanksgiving
- It is not a prayer to be rescued, it praises God for rescue from drowning

## I JONAH REMEMBERED GOD'S JUDGMENT

The verses tend to interweave the themes but they are relatively easy to unravel

3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

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 brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.

What is clear from these verses is the hopelessness of his situation – it was God's judgment

- God hurled him into the deep, God's waves and breakers swept over him
- He was in a situation that was beyond human help
- If *Sheol* (the pit) the place of the dead was in the depths of the earth
- Jonah was in darkness in the depths of the sea – but in God's care

There is a tough lesson to be learned here

- It's not easy to accept that some unwelcome things that happen enable God's work
- It's difficult to share a personal example but I do so in the hope it might help
- One of the great sacrifices in ministry for me was moving away from this area
- But happily my earlier appointments were all in a 200-mile radius of home
- Then suddenly, the system which I had tried hard to manipulate worked against me
- And I ended up as far from home on the British mainland as I could be
- The lesson I learned was that unbelief says, 'I know best and I am in control'
- A rebellious (somewhat disobedient) faith says, 'God knows best and I am in control'
- But true faith says, 'God knows best and God is in control'
- Battered and bruised we made the long journey south to Plympton
- To an appointment I would not have looked at had it not been in Devon
- I began to say, 'I'll do whatever I am asked to do to the best of my ability'
- No wheeling and dealing, no manipulation no 'God knows best but I am in control'
- Sometimes it's easier and sometimes it's really difficult
- Unbelief always spills over into disobedience – faith works out in obedience
- Why do we think that we will make a better job of ordering our lives than God?
- Answer: Unbelief – so when we become Christians we give our broken lives to God
- He makes us new and we spend further years clawing it back to break it again

## II JONAH REMEMBERED GOD'S PRESENCE

The irony is that by trying to run from God's presence, Jonah ended up in the fish

2 He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

4 I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple.'

7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

The expression 'from the depths of the grave' literally means from the 'belly of *Sheol*'

- For the Hebrew people *Sheol* (Gk *Hades*) was the abode of the dead (the grave)
- In darkness, inside the fish, Jonah thought he had gone to join the dead
- He had been banished from God and deprived of his favour
- Yet, in his distress, he remembered the Lord
- In the waters, Jonah realised that his life was 'ebbing away'
- It was at that moment that his thoughts turned to the Lord and his 'holy temple'

Isn't it true that it is often at our lowest moments, when we realise the futility of self-reliance

- That our thoughts are turned to God, 'the presence and blessing of God' (worship)

I don't know what caused William Cowper, to write these lines but I can relate to them:

O For a Closer Walk With God  
A calm and heavenly frame  
A light to shine upon the road  
That leads me to the Lamb

Where is the blessedness I knew  
When I first saw the Lord?  
Where is that soul-refreshing view  
Of Jesus and His word?

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!  
How sweet their memory still!  
But they have left an aching void  
The world can never fill.

Return, O holy Dove! Return  
Sweet messenger of rest!  
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn  
And drove Thee from my breast.

The dearest idol I have known  
Whate'er that idol be  
Help me tear if from Thy throne  
And worship only Thee.

On the ship, the sailors had called in vain upon their gods

- But from the depths, inside the fish, Jonah knew the power of God's salvation
- He thought of his holy temple at Jerusalem
- And the Ark of the Covenant, symbolic of the God's presence with his people
- When Jonah refocused in prayer on the praise, the presence and the people of God
- Then he recalled the worship of the temple, the place of the sacrifice of the Lamb
- William Cowper concludes his lovely hymn in this way:

So shall my walk be close with God  
Calm and serene my frame  
So purer light shall mark the road  
That leads me to the Lamb.  
(MHB 461)

I JONAH REMEMBERED GOD'S JUDGMENT

II JONAH REMEMBERED GOD'S PRESENCE

III JONAH REMEMBERED GOD'S WORD

If Jonah had turned a deaf ear to the word of God in Chapter 1

- He recalled God's Word in Chapter 2
- Even beginning to cross-reference Jonah's Psalm to the book of Psalms
- Would be beyond the scope of our thoughts today

8 "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

9 But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."

In just these two verses, we can hear echoes of the Psalms

- From the Lord comes deliverance (Psalm 3:8)
- I hate those who cling to worthless idols (Psalm 31:6)
- The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord (Psalm 37:39)
- I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving (Psalm 69:30)
- Let them sacrifice thank-offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy (Ps. 107:22)

Jonah wanted to bring an offering of thanksgiving before God because of God's mercies

- The context makes it clear that his vow is complete obedience to God
- Jonah realises that salvation comes from God
- And what he needs to do to is to entrust himself to God's sovereign will

My father used to tell a story about a local preacher in the Devonport Circuit, Bill Whitehead

- Mr Whitehead had two sons, I think one died of tuberculosis and the other of cancer
- A few days after his second son had died, Mr Whitehead appeared at the Bible study
- Not knowing what to say my Dad said to him
- "I didn't expect you to be here this evening, Mr Whitehead"
- to which Mr Whitehead replied, "Where did you expect me to be?"

We can all look back over the past year and think of reasons not to say the Covenant prayer

- but when we do so we are saying, God knows best and I am putting God in control