

T. Austin-Sparks:

"They knew not... the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath" (Acts 13:27).

All that the majority of Christians, and others, know about the Prophet Jonah is the quite general substance of the little book that goes by his name. It is that he was commanded to go to Nineveh and deliver a solemn warning as to imminent judgment: that he refused to go and ran away, taking a ship to Tarshish: that a heavy storm arose on the sea so that the ship and crew were in jeopardy of their lives: that the superstitious sailors decided that there was a man of evil omen on board and they cast lots as to who it was: that the lot fell on Jonah; he confessed and told them to throw him overboard: that he was swallowed by a great fish and three days later was vomited on to dry land: and so forth.

Very little more and other is commonly known about Jonah, and the mention of his name usually brings little other than: 'Oh, yes, Jonah was swallowed by a whale!'

The fact is that Jonah was a great Prophet in Israel, contemporary with the close of Elisha's ministry (2 Kings 14:25). It will perhaps surprise our readers to know that in the middle of the nineteenth century a saintly and scholarly servant of God in Scotland wrote a book on the ministry of Jonah which runs into no fewer than 359 pages.

We shall see later that the Lord Jesus Himself concentrated His testimony to Israel with two references to Jonah. In this series of messages, as you have recognized, we are not dealing with the life and times of each Prophet in question, but only seeking to put our finger upon what we believe to be the particular 'Voice' of each; it is a matter of what is resultant from the passing on of the Prophet. The Prophet passes by, but his 'Voice' remains! The voice of Jonah is very challenging, and Jesus hung the destiny of Israel as a nation upon that voice. What then does this voice say at all times, and to our time essentially?

1. Firstly we must take note of a certain uniqueness about Jonah and his mission.

It was not something new in the eternal thought of God, but in the days of Jonah the specific call and commission of that Prophet was something new. So new and unusual was it that it startled both Jonah and Israel. In a way it was unheard of; certainly it was foreign to the ideas of the nation. It was a break-in, an innovation, a strange thing, a departure from tradition. While God did not plan or purpose the disobedience and breakdown of Jonah, in His foreknowledge and sovereignty He ordered that it should form the very setting and basis of a miracle which would give the message and a commission a thousand times more significance than it otherwise would have held. So deep and far-seeing are the ways of God! God just rode roughshod over all the set and fixed ideas of His own people; over all their notions and settled ways. It was a new thing in Israel, and that was a part - only a part, but a strong part - of Jonah's dilemma and difficulty.

Therein is the first note in his 'Voice'. The whole battle with Judaism in New Testament times, and, as indicated by our basic phrase (Acts 13:27), very largely, if not entirely, raged around this very fact. Stephen was murdered very largely because of this question. It is

The Serious Peril of Prejudice

Prejudice in Israel, as in Christianity, and everywhere, just means and says: 'God must not do that.' It shuts the door to man and to God.

If the writer may give his own testimony, for what it is worth, on this point, he has to say that a very big turning-point in his life and ministry, from limitation to great enlargement; was reached at a certain time. One Lord's Day morning I preached on prejudice. Didn't I slaughter prejudice! I called it by all the evil names that I could lay my tongue to. I called it 'the closed, slammed and barred door against God and man'. Very well! During the following week I received an invitation to a certain conference with all expenses paid. I had said long before that I would never have anything to do with what that conference stood for; indeed, I would never touch it at a distance. Well, this very kind and generous invitation came, and all my prejudice at once looked for a reason to refuse. I was a very busy man and my diary was very full of engagements for months ahead. So that was the first resort, and I did not think that my diary would let me down for a good excuse. But to my consternation the only week without appointments for a long time was the week of that conference! Was there any other honest excuse for refusing. I could not find one anywhere or anyhow.

As I sat there with my problem, it was as though a voice said: 'Now, what about your sermon on prejudice? You have only two courses open to you: either to say that you will not go, or to go; and if you say that you will not, it will be because of your prejudice!' It was a battle, but the Lord, and a bit of honesty, won. I went, and although full of reservations and questions, as I have said, it was a life-crisis which resulted in a new release of the Lord. Forgive the personal reference, but it may serve to give point to the message.

Prejudice can be a thief and a robber. It can be absolutely disastrous, as in the case of Israel. Said Nathanael: "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" That was the most critical point in his whole life, and had he not been an honest man, 'an Israelite indeed in whom was no guile' (Jacob), all that was subsequently said of him would have been lost (John 21:2 and if, as is believed, he was identical with Bartholomew, Acts 1:4,12,13). How it becomes us to analyse our prejudices, to see if they are prejudices or true. Remember, Jesus Himself was involved in common prejudices, strongly supported and 'documented' by the best authorities, people would say; but history gives the answer.

2. Prejudice, as in the case of Jonah, meant an unwillingness to break with the set ways of Israel. God's dealings with Jonah, and Jonah's voice among the Prophets is the

Divine Thunder Against Exclusivism

In Israel, and Jonah, prejudice was based upon a wrong and false interpretation of election. Election with them, while being perfectly true, was interpreted as being a matter of salvation, whereas, in truth, it was a matter of vocation. They were it, for time and eternity. They were the first and the last. All others were hopeless exclusions. "Except ye be circumcised, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1,25). The tragedy, nay, the crime of Israel was twofold; it misinterpreted their calling and election, and in so doing made God far, far smaller than He is. Israel - to them - was a box or cage into which they forced God and sought to keep Him there. If there is one thing that the book and history of Jonah says above everything else, it is that God will shake sea and land to show that prejudice and exclusivism are a violation of His nature as "the God of all grace". The history of all ultra-exclusive movements, related to God's name, is one of endless divisions, disorders, and reproach. It is immensely impressive that Jesus - the full and final expression of God's grace - took up Jonah after Jonah's death, burial and resurrection, typically. Israel was indeed chosen, elect, selected, but it was in order that, by holiness and Godliness of life, of character, as God's representation, they might be God's messenger of grace to the nations; that, in the Seed of Abraham all nations of the earth should be blessed. This is the vocation of the Church; but its effective fulfilment waits and depends upon it being a true representation of God! Jonah defaulted in the first place. Israel failed finally. The 'Voice' of the Prophet Jonah is a warning.

3. So we come at last to that full and final voice of Jonah:

"A Greater Than Jonah is Here"
(Matthew 12:41)

We have said "Final", and by that we mean when the battle is over and Jonah - on resurrection ground - truly represents God. The context of Matthew 12:41 is in verse 40. There, on the one side, is "a wicked and adulterous generation" the Israel which has lost its place because it has failed in its vocation (note that!). In the middle is Jonah as a parable and sign. On the other side, Jesus; going down into death - on that side representing that which does not and cannot live before God, and then, by resurrection, representing that which is alive unto God for ever. This is the 'Sign' to Israel, whether historic or spiritual.

This is the voice of the Prophet Jonah, but it needs more than 359 pages to exhaust it!