

A sermon preached by Nick Moir on Remembrance Day, 2012

He was our oldest link to conflicts that stretch right back into history. He was born in 1870 and his first military encounter was with General Gordon in the Sudan where he also later served under General Kitchener. He saw action in the Anglo-Afghan war and the Boer war, served on the western front in the First World War and –too old for military service – was one of the first to enrol in the Home Guard in the Second World War, given the rank of Lance Corporal. His name, of course, was Jack Jones and he died this week at the age of 142 (the newspapers said 92, but that can't be right, can it?).

Go back two and a half thousand years and we find ourselves in another situation comedy with a near namesake of the beloved Jonesy – Jonas or Jonah. Make no mistake, this is a comedy. Sandwiched as it is between the serious and often gloomy books of the minor prophets we tend to read it in the same po-faced way. If we laugh at the prophet who runs away from God's call to preach in Nineveh and who is cross when those blasted Ninevites have the temerity to pay heed to his prophetic word and repent instantly – if we laugh at him we tend to do so scornfully, but I don't think we're meant to. This is not 'The Office' or 'The Thick of It'; this is 'Dad's Army'. The principal characters may be funny, daft, slow and miss the point but actually they're loveable too. Jonah is Jonesy who hearing the call in verse 1 of chapter 1 had a 'don't panic' moment and in verse 2 flees in the opposite direction to the nearest port to catch the earliest boat to get the hell out of there.

Scholars tell us that the book of Jonah was written in about the fourth century BC, but concerns a character only barely mentioned in the book of Kings who lived four hundred years earlier, when the superpower of the Middle East was Assyria whose capital was Nineveh. It was the Assyrians who conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BC and who, under Sennacherib, besieged Jerusalem in about 701 BC. That is one of the rare episodes in ancient history when we have accounts written by both sides of the conflict, and the Jewish biblical account is pretty reconcilable with a contemporaneous account written on a clay prism and discovered in 1830 by a British archaeologist in the ruined palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh (now in the British Museum).

The Nineveh of Jonah's day was huge and awe-inspiring, the greatest city of the known world. It had an ancient history, one of the oldest cities of the world. The area was populated by 6000 BC and had become an important centre of worship of the Assyrian goddess Ishtar by 3000 BC. But it was Sennacherib who rebuilt the city and made it magnificent. The wealth came partly through the plundering of other nations, including Babylon to the south. 'Its inhabitants, young and old, I did not spare', he wrote, 'and with their corpses I filled the streets of the city.' But Babylon was to have its revenge a hundred years later when, in a coalition with the Medes, they besieged Nineveh in 612 BC and razed it to the ground. It was never rebuilt though the Arabs from the 7th century AD built a new city, Mosul, on the opposite side of the river Tigris.

My bible heads Jonah 3 with the title 'Conversion of Nineveh', but any conversion of that great pagan city was very short-lived and has left no trace in history. In the bit of Jonah 3 we didn't read it says:

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh.... all shall

turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.' (Jonah 3.6-9)

Perhaps he did have a moment's pause for sanity, but if he did, it didn't last. The bloodthirsty violence continued and the promised bloody end followed, albeit decades later.

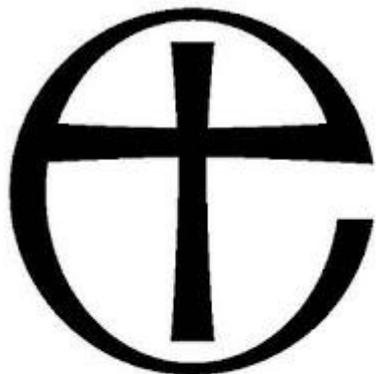
But what of the Assyrians? Their descendants still live in the surrounding area today, living alongside Arabs and Kurds. But unlike their mainly Muslim neighbours, the Assyrians are Christian, many belonging to some of the most ancient churches of Christendom. They look back primarily, of course, to Jesus, but also to that other Galilean prophet eight centuries before Jesus, Jonah. Of the two great mounds of Nineveh excavated by archaeologists, one is called the Nabi Yunus. In the 6th century, before the coming of the Arabs, the region was struck by plague. The local bishop called them to heed the message of Jonah and to fast for three days in repentance for their sins. The plague is said to have stopped and on the fourth day they celebrated. This fast, called 'Som Baoutha' or 'Nineveh's wish' is observed to this day, not only by the Assyrians but by their related churches, the Egyptian Copts and the Ethiopian Orthodox.

The area has been governed by successive empires: the Medes, the Seleucids, the Parthians, the Arabs and the Ottomans. Following the First World War, the French and the British carved up the area and zones of responsibility. The plan was that it would become part of Syria under the French but shortly before the end of the war oil was discovered in the region and the British put in a successful bid for it to be included in their territory alongside the ancient Babylonian lands further south – hence the shape of modern Iraq and the further bloodshed and warfare the region endured during what is now called the Battle of Mosul in 2004 and following years. Waves of murders and threats by insurgents led to an exodus of 12,000 Assyrian Christians from the city in 2008 and the future of the Christian community there as in other parts of the Middle East is precarious indeed.

Nineveh lies in what the ancient Chronicler of Israel calls the land of Nimrod. Nimrod was an ancient king of legendary brutality who in the Jewish and Islamic traditions became almost synonymous with evil. His methods were practised by his spiritual heirs such as Sennacherib and, more recently, Saddam. As we on this day remember the awful cost of war and its unspeakable brutality, it is ironic perhaps that Nimrod's tune is played so frequently – Elgar's evocative music bringing us an aching sense of peace within the tumult that might otherwise overwhelm us.

But back to Jonah – and indeed to Jonesy. The prophet is sent into the city, the place of false religion and the worship of power bolstered by the practice of brutality, to call his hearers to the true God and to an exercise of power that is inspired and ennobled by true belief and its resulting righteousness. That was what prophets were for; it was what Israel was for: to proclaim the truth and show a better way. The joke was that Israel most often failed – and in particular it allowed its high calling to go to its head; instead of transforming the world she wanted to stand in superior fashion apart from the world. She spent much of her time running away from her true vocation – in fact, running in the opposite direction. And when sent back into the midst of the city to proclaim the message she is then resentful that it is actually heard – the people repent. That's uncomfortable because it implies a God who is at work beyond Israel's walls and who has greater purposes. It is forcing the people of God to discover that God's agenda is far greater and more universal than theirs – and, we could add, than ours, because in our time Jonah is us, the Church of God – and for us, in our time, the Church of England.

The media have struggled slightly to pigeonhole our new archbishop-elect. At one moment he is worldly, because he's served in the oil industry – Nineveh if you like, the big bad world the church does not seem to touch or relate to. But then he begins his press conference with a short prayer and he keeps talking about God and Jesus – which, perversely, the cloistered, out of touch church, well, isn't supposed to do. I thought it was a good start. I welcome his appointment; I like that mixture of steely worldwiseness and clear faith and godliness. On one of the blogs I looked at as I was taking in the news I saw this:



THE CHURCH
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**Loving Jesus with
a slight air of superiority
since A.D. 597**

I laughed because it's true. The Church of England in its history and ethos has been like Jonah: a little standoffish, wary of stepping out of its comfort zone, off its high horse, of confronting some of the dark things in our society, of being prophetic, of giving up some of our exclusive privileges for the sake of our real divine calling. The 19th century Bishop Ryle of Liverpool once said that 'But for the Holy Spirit the Church of England would long ago have died of dignity'.

The Church of England as Jonah. But it also like Jonesey: yes, looking rather old, a bit deaf, prone like your vicar to ramble on a bit too long until someone shuts him up. But also in its own way faithful, seen through years of war and peace and has been there, involved, part of what we admire about being English and having within its DNA many of the charms and qualities that are Englishness at its best. Like Jonah, like Jonesey, to be laughed at, yes, but never scornfully, because for all his faults we know that he is chosen by God, loved by God and precious in his sight.

And on this Remembrance Day the Church of England will be standing alongside our fellow countrymen up and down the country, in cities and in villages, remembering the cost of war, the price of peace and our shared humanity. In our day, thank God, there is no great desire in our nation to wage war, to shed blood and to build empires based on brutality – and I like to think that that is because the gospel we proclaim has at least in that respect seeped into our national psyche. My sadness at the death of Corporal Jones this week is perhaps accentuated by the thought that the qualities he represented are more difficult to find in our brasher, pacier and less kindly world of the 21st century – but then I hear his ghost saying 'don't panic, everybody, don't panic' and I see an archbishop-elect who says the same and looks as though he really means it.