The Task is God's Not Ours
The Book of Jonah
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The Bishop of Barbados Offers an Anglican Understanding of the Book of Jonah

a) The Literal Interpretation
Many persons take this wonderful story literally and forces it to answer the type of questions which it was not written to answer. When this book is taken literally, we venture into discussions about the nature of the big fish, and how long can some one survive in the intestines of a fish, and into the more ridiculous discussion about whether or not animals really wear sack cloth and ashes and repent, when we all know that they do not, indeed cannot sin. We can go on and on with such a discussion that has nothing whatsoever to deal with the powerful message of the book and only serves to cloud, if not destroy the message.

b) The Anglican Way of Interpretation
In the best of the Anglican approach to the Bible, we are given the freedom to treat this book as a parable. In the words of Schmidt quoted above, we enter into discussion with the author of the book, listening very carefully to his/her message. Our first step in this approach is the identification of the context.

c) The Context
A sound knowledge of the context can assist us in getting a better grasp of the message of the book Jonah. It is a message that sets out to make some profound and telling points to a community that was in great danger of relegating God to being just one of its citizens. This was the Jewish community that was still rebuilding after the devastation of the destruction of Jerusalem and exile.

The Jewish community to which the book was addressed, was a community that was hard pressed as it worked to rebuild its sacred shrine, the temple in Jerusalem . Neighbours were hostile and uncooperative. Those whose task it was to do the rebuilding were fast losing interest. But there was a small group that was determined to re-establish a strong Jewish presence in Palestine by first of all rebuilding the temple as a rallying point for Judaism.

It was felt that one of the ways that would help to boost the lagging interest among Jews was to project the community as extra special to God, even if this was pushed to the extent of excluding others. There was already existing, a foundation for this. The traditions of promise, election and covenant that were early strands of Old Testament theology, were put to use, and the hope of the Yahwist in Gen 12: was ignored. Given the humiliation of exile and the hostility of the Samaritans, it was easy to ignore the hope,

Through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.....(Gen.12:3)

Contrary to this hope, an exclusive relationship with God was proclaimed. Given the present crisis of the community, it seems like a legitimate and indeed sensible thing to do.
It appeared to be all part of the effort to survive in a hostile environment.

But the community was in grave danger of making God into a Jew. To the writer of Jonah, this was carrying things a bit too far. There was need to correct this very faulty understanding of God, and he set

out to do so. Note how the context to which the writer is responding is going to shape the message that the book is trying to give to the Jewish community. Anglicanism following Biblical scholarship, takes the context very seriously in any attempt to grasp the message.

The Context: One of hostility towards the Jewish community that resorts to religious exclusivity to strengthen its efforts to survive.

d) The Message

The book can be compared with the parables in the Gospels, and must rank as one of the most powerful rejections of one of the plagues of humanity. What is this plague? It is that of rejecting those who differ from us, and assuming that God rejects them as well. Those who are not like us are deemed to be not of God. It could be the case of declaring that African slaves have no souls, or those who are Muslims fall easily, if not naturally into an 'arc of evil'. In the present discussion on human sexuality, homosexuals can suffer the same fate.

This human weakness is projected onto God and so he is made into our own image, and made to sort out his children in terms of race, class, gender , religion, sexual orientation, and many other categories. We can treat those who differ from us as those for whom God, like us, has no concern.

The writer of Jonah sets out to rescue the inherited understanding of God from this new dangerous threat, indeed from this new heresy. The inherited understanding presents God as compassionate, and forgiving, and shows concern for all people, as compared with the new understanding that presents God as very exclusive, and concerned primarily, if not only, for the Jew.

The God of the writer of Jonah is the God of Deut. 23: 7-8 who issues the command:

> You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother;
> you shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were
> a sojourner in his land.

The powerful message of the writer is that God is the God of all people, the Jew as well as all other people. He is God even of the people of that hated city Nineveh, and can have compassion not only on them but even of their animals..

This reading of the book Of Jonah is very Anglican. It takes on board all the critical scholarship that is needed to release the powerful message of the book in a manner that would allow it to speak to us in our own time. It sets the message free and allows it to address the issues of the day.

When we follow this approach, we hear the powerful message that speaks to our conditions today. It warns us about sorting God's children out in categories and then deciding who are near to him and who are farthest away. **This task is God's, not ours**.