

Teachers Notes 5 (see Activity sheet 4): Jonah and the Big Fish (and the tiny caterpillar)



Jonah was a prophet – not an easy job as he seemed to have a direct line to God and God wanted to use him as a messenger to the people of the earth. It all started to go wrong when God asked Jonah to go to a place called Nineveh in Babylon and tell the people living there to stop behaving very badly. The only problem was that Jonah didn't want to help the people there. He didn't like them, he knew they were wicked and he wanted them to be punished for their mistakes.

So, instead of listening to God, Jonah thought he would run away from Nineveh and not do what God asked him. He ran to the seaside where he found a ship that was going to another city in the completely opposite direction to Nineveh. He paid the captain, climbed down into the lower part of the boat and went to sleep.

Shortly after the boat left the shore, a very bad storm came up and started tossing the boat around. All the men were very afraid so they started to throw all their packages and bags overboard in hope that the ship would float and they wouldn't drown. The captain soon went to find Jonah who was still sound asleep in the boat. He said to Jonah, "How can you sleep? Get up and pray to your god, maybe he can help us!" The captain didn't realize that Jonah didn't just believe in any god but the one true God of the people of Israel and that he actually could help them.

Meanwhile, the other sailors decided that the storm was Jonah's fault. He must have done something wrong to make his god so angry. So they asked Jonah, "What have you done? What god do you believe in? What can we do to make this storm stop?" Jonah told them, "I

believe in the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land and I am running away from something God asked me to do. It is my fault this is happening. If you throw me into the sea the storm will stop." The men didn't want to hurt Jonah by throwing him off the boat so they tried to row the best they could, but the storm just got worse. So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea. The storm immediately calmed and the sea became still. The men on the boat realised that Jonah believed in the one true God and prayed to him with grateful thanks

Then the captain and the crew looked out to sea as a huge fish came and swallowed up Jonah. God actually sent the fish to keep Jonah from drowning. Jonah stayed in the fish for three days and three nights.

Just think for a second what it would be like to be inside a fish. There were no windows, and lots of strange things floating around that Jonah couldn't see because it was so dark and it would be so smelly. Jonah probably didn't know if he would ever see daylight again. While Jonah was trapped inside the fish, he did a lot of praying to God. He asked God to forgive him for running away. He also thanked God for not allowing him to drown.

After the third day God told the fish to spit Jonah out onto dry land. And the fish did just that. Jonah was happy to be out of the dark belly of the fish, safe on dry land but he was in a state, slimy and smelly. Then the Lord told Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh and tell the people there to stop being bad. This time Jonah obeyed God and left for Nineveh right away.

When Jonah got there he told the people what had happened to him. He warned them that God said that they should stop doing bad things or in forty days the city and everything in it would be destroyed. To Jonah's big surprise the people listened to him and they prayed to God and they said sorry for all the bad things they had done and promised to change their ways. Soon the king of Nineveh heard what was going on and he ordered that everyone should listen to God and to stop doing bad things. And when God saw that they were trying to do good instead of bad, he felt love for them and did not destroy their city.

That could be the end of the story except Jonah left the city very angry. He was furious that God didn't punish the people whom he disliked. So Jonah sat on a hill and sulked. He looked down at the city as the sun beat down on his head so he found a shady gourd plant to shelter under and settled down for a snooze. God saw Jonah and knew how he was feeling so he sent him a little messenger. This was a tiny green caterpillar who munched his way happily through the stem of the gourd plant. When Jonah woke up, there was no shade and he was getting sunburnt. Yet again he was angry with God.

God explained to Jonah that he loves everyone (after all he created people). He liked plants too but people had to come first and Jonah needed to stop feeling sorry for himself and be glad for the people of Nineveh. After all, they had said, "Sorry" and changed their ways so Jonah needed to learn a bit more about forgiveness. Jonah rubbed his face, thought about God's message and realised that he needed to change his ways as well!

Notes

You can find this story in the Book of Jonah, right near the end of the Old Testament. It was written at a time when the people of Israel were recovering from years of exile as slaves in the empire of Babylon so they really wouldn't like the citizens of Ninevah.

Jews often share this story of escape from exile at their festival of Yom Kippur – the most holy festival of the year, a time of repentance and atonement.

Christian thinkers link the time in the fish with Jesus' time in the tomb. They also see it as anticipating Jesus' message, "but I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Matthew 5 v44

The theme is undoubtedly one of Forgiveness so fits well with that value at school.

This would make a very good P4C story.

It is a brilliant inspiration for art work.