SAMPLE MATERIAL

JONAH

LENT 2027

FOR THE DIOCESE OF CHESTER

We are invited to join together during Lent to journey together with Jonah, learn, and pray together.

This is a small advanced sample of the Jonah material, to help clergy, small groups, schools, and churches know what to expect of the Jonah journey and to help with planning ahead!

You'll find a letter from Bishop Mark and introduction to the material. We've also included daily notes for the first two days as well as an example of the weekly group study material, and ideas for sermon notes.

INTRODUCTION

A letter to the Diocese of Chester

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I wish I could capture how precious you are to the One who calls you 'friend'. Trying to do so is like telling you I saw a beautiful sunrise and knowing that my words could never paint the skies, shape the landscape, calm the air, or conduct the birds into that symphony of breathtaking beauty which captured my soul on that particular morning.

It is easy to say that God loves you. It is easy to speak of the manner in which He draws you into His purposes and delights to partner with you in His determined works of grace. It is easy to say, but feels impossible to capture when we all know the reality of our stumbling responses, broken commitments, and frustrated labours.

Time and again, this summer, I have come back to Jonah as I have prayed for you, for us. Jonah's story has accompanied me in loss and beauty and violence and worship and challenge and the joy of friendships old and new; embracing the reality of life in its rawest form. It has been as if this ancient prophet has wept with me in gut-aching loss, (sort of) enjoyed getting lost in beautiful places, bristled at violent attack, revelled in unexpected good company, and danced with awkwardly envious joy as some charismatic monks worshipped like King David returning with the Ark of the Covenant. Mine has been a literal summer of road-trips which will be reflected metaphorically in each of our experiences.

The book of Jonah is a timeless gift which spans contexts, covenants, and time. It has called the faithful to holy response down through the ages and is still as sharp in its application as it is in its wit. It embraces the immensity of God's faithfulness, and witnesses to His inconceivable generosity and fathomless patience. It plumbs the depth of human despair, explores what it means to hear God speak, and shows that even an Average Jo(e) can radically transform the world around us when we are willing to offer ourselves in our imperfection into a goodness beyond our grasp in the call of the Lord.

It is utterly amazing: pulsing with the very heartbeat of God for us today! Early each morning, I have found myself writing just to ponder and pray. And, as I have written, a textually ironic hope has grown that we might reflect together in the light of His heart-calls to us in our day. One of the hidden jokes in Jonah is that he responds alone to God's call, and this is not the way the Bible works: even the heroes work with an Aaron, an Elisha, or a band of disciples. Loneliness is hard because it is not the way God designed us to operate: we will see this in the text, but let's counter it by gathering to grow together. As we look outwards, form partnerships with unexpected people, establish gathering places for Christians old and new, and invest in others, let's learn the lessons Jonah teaches.

The reflections offered here are considerably less amazing than the story they reflect upon, but they grow from the deep conviction that we are called just as Jonah was. The task that we face as we try to communicate the message of Christ with 1.5 million people seems pretty impossible, but Jonah had huge impact with the worst thought-through strategy imaginable.

As we will see, there is so much that is comically 'wrong' in this book which turn out to be deeply right: Jonah's slapstick response, rescue, message, and reactions. The idea that he is called alone and the

faith seen in the Gentiles and their responses. The profundity of the challenge and the simplicity that lies at the heart of it all: all of this should make us smile. This is kind of the point, and I want to invite you to join together as we reflect and pray our way through Lent with Jonah.

Imagine what God can do with us if we will but stop beating ourselves (and each other) up. I am not sure Jonah got as much wrong as we think he did, but the point is that he can teach us to respond better than he did as he laughs at himself and invites us to radical differentness with a twinkle in our eye and a song in our heart.

Come with me and read of the call of God to change the most challenging places.

Come and reflect on our propensity to deceive ourselves.

Come and wonder as God works His purpose out around Jonah's stumbling following.

Come and pray and hear the call afresh.

Come as you are and dare to believe that there might be a part for you to play in your particular Nineveh however fishy your journey may feel.

Whatever your reaction, even if it is as shame-filled as Jonah's, will you dare to offer it to the One who calls you 'friend' and responds kindly?

Above all, can we focus on the God who is able to work with and through even normal folk like me or you, regular folk like the 'Average Jo(e)' we meet in this book? These words will never capture the immensity of His grace or the urgency of His passion for His wayward children: but the Spirit, the Scriptures, and reflection over a good few cuppas will certainly begin that process.

For the Son has risen and this is more beautiful than I can say.

Bishop Mark

Summer 2026

INTRODUCTION

Notes on using this material daily

Jonah is an amazing book and your mission (should you choose to accept it) is to pray, laugh, and ponder your way daily through it over the next four weeks. Later in the book you will find material for use in small groups weekly and sermon notes if you use this as a church during Lent, but first we break the text into 20 'chunks', enough for five a week spread over four weeks.

The challenge is to choose a time and place you can take 5-15 minutes a day for 5 days a week, and then arrange to meet with God using this text as a springboard for conversation. If it is easier, it is also available as a daily podcast or electronically. Try it, and see what happens!

As you read you will find that Jonah is hilarious, God is mind-blowingly brilliant, and people respond even when Jonah appears to fail. This is a book that works because it is funny, and helps us understand how God works with us in our own partial understanding and struggles. God is in the business of calling and sending people like you and me, and He does so knowing what He is getting.

Please let yourself see the humour: laugh, lower those defences, and together let's learn to live as Jonah is challenged to. The time has come to look again at Jonah with a smile on our faces without worrying too much if we don't get it all right first-time round.

Each section begins with the text of the book of Jonah, and if you have time you might like to read the whole of that week's chapter each day before focussing on the specific verses of the day. (There is a note at the end (page 147) about the translation used in this book; please use whatever version of the Bible you want to.) Each daily 'chunk' reflects on the text and then ends with three questions for reflection offered to help you pray and picking up on what we might learn through the humour: what strikes you as funny, odd, or important? How does this speak into your walk with Jesus? And what do you need to practise if you want to grow? These feel like the kind of questions the book wants us to ask, not least because they are exactly the questions that the two groups of pagans (the sailors and the Ninevites) will ask and we will get joyfully exasperated at Jonah for missing. And finally, because we read as Christians: we always ask where Christ is in all of this.

So let's read and laugh and reflect and pray and grow together as we dive in with Jonah afresh (do you see what I did there?).

1.1 I SAY, I SAY, I SAY… (1.1–3)

> *Now the LORD's word came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach against it, for their wickedness has come up before me."*
>
> *3 But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid its fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.*
>
> (Jonah 1.1-3)

OK, let's stop there: is this a good or bad interaction between God and Jonah?

The way we read these opening lines sets the tone for the whole of the rest of our interaction with this book. Maybe you hear a schoolteacher: 'this, child, is the way you are to act…' followed by disobedience and punishment. Perhaps Jonah is some kind of recognised prophet who realises that he is going to look foolish whatever happens if he goes to Nineveh. Or is this some random bloke who starts hearing voices, responding by doing exactly the thing he needs to do to test out if he is going mad or not?

If we read the text in the first way the whole thing becomes quite transactional: God calls, Jonah responds with marginally less defiance each time, God saves Nineveh. This is great, but might there be more going on that we are too strait-laced to see?

If we think of Jonah as a known figure then we might have some sympathy with him: if he preaches doom and it doesn't happen he loses his reputation. But surely God won't show mercy to his worst enemy? If he preaches and they do repent does he have to rewrite his whole theology? There's deep challenge here for those of us who have followed Christ for a long time: how often do we stop doing what God is asking us to do either because we know better than God, or because we are worried about reputation?

In reality, though, we know next to nothing about Jonah except that the text presents him as a real person (by naming his dad, about whom we also know next to nothing). He is 'Average Jo(e)' like you or me and maybe this is the point: 'you know when you are bumbling along, reading a text or picking up litter, and you are quite convinced that God tells you to go and give £50 to that crazed-looking old person over the street…' You know the idea is crazy, but you can't get it out of your head.

And this idea is crazy. Nineveh was the largest city in the world, the future capital of the Assyrian Empire, and the epitome of evil. Average Jo(e) here was to rock up, preach in pidgin Assyrian, and announce its destruction… yeah, right. The sensible thing to do is ignore this idiocy… too much goat's cheese and a bad goblet of Rioja (or was it Rijoppa?) had got him imagining stuff.

But the text is clear… God had spoken… and what is amazing is that Jonah, our Average Jo(e), does something about it. What he does is hilarious, probably wrong, but it is something, and it enables God to act.

You see the sensible version of this would be something along the lines of:

> *Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me. Jonah rolled over realising how crazy the idea was that he might have a role in the conversion of Assyria, and went back to sleep hoping he remembered this story to tell his sister all about the next day.*

There is also, though, a darker version of the story which could have been told. This is the one where Jonah hears God speak and takes the task to himself. In this version Jonah has been well schooled in the necessity of bold faith and his own centrality in the story of the coming Kingdom of God. Perhaps you, Jonah, whom the world would deride as merely an Average Jo(e) have been raised up for such a time as this. This is the mindset that reads of David and Goliath and feels only the call to be David or reads the triumph of 1 Kings 18 without noticing the trouble that follows.

In this version there are full funding models and a review board. Furlough must be taken and Jonah develops a culturally specific missional model for the conversion of Nineveh. Posters are printed, church family challenged to give, and three faithful old ladies wish more people would join them in supporting the endeavour in prayer.

> *Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me. Jonah heard and began to dream: imagine the conversions, think of the media engagement, picture the speaking invitations. He began to plan…*

But this is not what happens. Jonah neither ignores the call nor becomes the centre of it. He acts, but does so in the most dramatically 'other' manner he can find. As he does so he tests, almost to destruction, whether this really is God. We don't really know who Jonah is, and we don't know where Tarshish is (scholars argue about this a lot), but this is not the point: the point is that it is not Nineveh.

The joke is that God speaks to Jonah and he does the opposite like some slapstick stage-fool. The serious point is that he acts and throws himself on the sovereignty of God: if this is God's call it will work out, if not why on earth would he want to go to Nineveh? The text bangs home the point by repeating three times (verses 1, 2, & 3) that this is of God; but seeing this is a privilege that we readers have which would have been less clear to Jonah.

(Please note that this is an extreme version of a tried and tested biblical discernment pattern, by the way: this is how humour works. Think of Gideon and the fleece: if this is you, God, then please act…)

This action costs him (he pays for the ticket) and is deeply risky (sea travel was dangerous). It is foolish, perhaps, but it is engaged. Oddly, in his disobedience we see a very profound model marked by three key dynamics that will shape the rest of this book.

- He acts when God calls (even when he does the wrong thing),
- He will not make himself the hero (in fact quite the opposite), and
- He places himself in situations where God must act to fulfil God's will (here he is 'on the move', later this will be much more dramatic).

Far from being a statement of rebellion and despair, these opening three verses set the tone for us to laugh at Jonah, marvel at God, and humbly face down our own instinct to rebellion.

It's an odd thing hearing God speak. Often, we only know for certain that He has spoken retrospectively: in the moment it is hard to be sure, blinded as we are by our own powers of self-deception and society's fickle relationship with dramatic events. The humour here is Jonah's reaction

when God speaks, but at least he responds, does so humbly, and in so doing enables God to act in a manner that proves it is God at work. Perhaps it is time to be more Jonah and learn both to hold possible 'words from God' lightly (especially when they benefit us) but also take the risk of responding when we sense God may be speaking.

Notice: what strikes you as funny, odd, or important? This may be stuff about the way that Jonah reacted, or the way that you read it. What is the Spirit highlighting?

Consider: how does this speak into your faith and wider life? How do you respond when you think you hear God speaking?

Act: what do you need to practise and grow in? Are you good at discerning God's voice? How do you avoid it? Where have you 'done it well' or been inspired by others?

Where is Jesus? Lift your eyes to Jesus: the One who heard God's call to go to a broken, sinful, and self-absorbed centre of human power to call it to repent. He has walked this road before us and is faithful.

1.2 What's all the fuss? (1.4–6)

> *4 But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty storm on the sea, so that the ship was likely to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and every man cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone down into the innermost parts of the ship and he was laying down, and was fast asleep. 6 So the ship master came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God! Maybe your God will notice us, so that we won't perish."*
>
> (Jonah 1.4-6)

Jonah has run away, God gets stroppy, the sailors panic, Jonah is guilted into action... and everyone laughs. Why is God running around after this Average Jo(e)? Why does it take the pagan sailors, each of whom worshipped a different false god, to bring Jonah to prayer? Why is Jonah able to sleep anyway given the storm?

Again, the humour opens our eyes to see.

Firstly, do you notice how everyone appears to assume that Jonah has escaped God's plan... except perhaps Jonah? (We will come back to Jonah). God said Nineveh, Jonah headed to Tarshish; the decision has been made and were it not for the rest of the book we would end the story there.

Except that neither the author nor (more importantly) God gives up. God is not fazed, not surprised, and not cowed. There is lots of symbolism lying behind the text here: the sea is the realm of chaos and ungodliness, and storms are often seen as things that work against God's purposes. That's partly why Jesus' calming of the storm is a key sign of his divinity in the Gospels, and why Jesus is the only one who really can sleep peacefully. Here, though, even that is subverted. It is God who casts the storm. The discernment of God's call is ongoing, and seen even in events that others may fear to be utterly hopeless.

Make no mistake: this was a proper storm. It was, quite literally, a storm 'of biblical proportions' (and you can't often say that). Life-long mariners were terrified not only to the point of prayer, but also to the point of throwing away all they possessed and all they hoped to earn from this voyage (their cargo was their profit and their investment). Why, oh why, do we assume that God's call on our lives feebly depends on our ability to grasp one conversation and do the right thing?

So the sailors pray, and along rushes the captain to get Jonah to pray too. And here is another joke. We have been told, twice, in verse three that he is going away from the presence of the Lord, but the Lord is throwing a storm at them and the captain expects Him to listen when Jonah prays. Even pagans realise that this God might be bigger than the box we put Him in, and here we see the first 'eye-opening' of the pagans in this book. Pagan sailors call, through Jonah, on the God of Israel, just as Jonah will call the Ninevites to do.

And Jonah snores. He is completely unconcerned for himself or for anyone else (which may be part of the problem highlighted by his reaction, of course.)

Is this simply another part of the joke? Everyone is panicking, but Jonah is insensitive to the whole lot of it despite being the cause of it. At one level, this is clearly funny and we should smile at the humour. However, we also must ask 'who sleeps whilst the world appears to be collapsing around them?', for surely the answer is clear. You only sleep if you know that it is not collapsing (unless you are dropping with utter exhaustion, and Jonah wasn't). Jonah's very sleep either shows just how deeply he knows he is in God's hands or what a complete and utter imbecile he is.

If it shows the second, then how amazing that God can use even him. Perhaps we need to learn from this possibility too, although this is probably not the point. No-one can go beyond the presence of the Lord, and this is the humour in the text which challenges our deep fear that we might somehow have managed it. The pagan sailors sense it, the story will prove it, and Average Joe(e) here inhabits it even in his foolishness.

He will pray as requested. Like us, all too often, he is slow to do so but God seems to know this. Of course he will pray, but he already knows he is held in God's hands and that is OK with him. It almost appears that he knows that the storm is from God (we will be told later that he does), and whether this ends with death or life, God is holding it all. The sleep implies that Jonah is OK with this.

Oh, to be more Jonah in our confidence in the planning of God. The goodness of God. The faithfulness and kindness of God. Oh, for the freedom to see how hard it is to step outside His will, and the confidence to see His guidance even in the scary things. Oh, for the peace, the fruit, the sleep.

Notice: what strikes you as funny, odd, or important? Why does Jonah sleep? Why does he seem to have no concern for anyone else? Why doesn't he pray? How come the pagan sailors know so much?

Consider: how does this speak into your faith and wider life? What is your prayer life like? How good are you at learning from others, even those who know little? Where is your focus as you pray?

Act: what do you need to practise and grow in? How do you make prayer an instinctive and Christ-shaped response?

Where is Jesus? Jesus also slept in a storm but for very different reasons, and when He woke He demonstrated His Lordship. Where is He in this storm?

SAMPLE WEEKLY RESOURCES

Resources: Week 1

The drama opens bluntly, quickly, and directly. We are familiar with it, but need to try to come to it fresh. Allow it to shock, amuse, amaze, and intrigue you. Pray for grace that you might read and listen like this is the first time… for the word of the Lord is about to come to Jonah!

In Jonah 1 we see God commissioning a prophet and evangelist, and Jonah's struggle to respond. Rather than seeing him simply as disobedient, we explore whether his response can be understood as a deeply real, honest, and amusing 'worked example' of how we react to the interruption of God's call on our lives.

It is easy to try to ignore God's call, easy to imagine stuff or make it up, but it is also quite simple to manipulate the seeds of a genuine call so that we become the centre of it. Jonah's response does none of these.

Here is a God who speaks, a God who cares, and a God who acts.

And here is Jonah, whom we will think of as an 'Average Jo(e)' trying to respond in the midst of human confusion and sharing his lessons so that we can do it a bit better.

Preaching themes

If you would like to follow this as a church do preach on Jonah 1. Do note that it's hard to write notes to assist someone else's preaching without either giving a(nother) Bible Study or writing the sermon. Your task is to reach faithfully to the text and your context, but here are some musings/thoughts/questions that might help:

- What does this tell us about God?
    - The God who speaks
    - The God who cares for the lost and acts
    - The God who cannot be disappointed, outrun, or abandoned.
- What does this teach us about responding to God?
    - The disruption and confusion of God's call
    - The need for discernment, wisdom, and action.
- How does this help us to live out the good news this week?
    - Being bold enough to risk responding
    - Trusting that God will make it right even when we get it wrong
    - Looking for the voice of God in the words and actions of others, perhaps especially the unexpected others, whilst still discerning that it is His voice.

SAMPLE WEEKLY RESOURCES

Group questions

Encourage people to engage with sections 1.1-1.5 of this book in the week before you meet.

When you meet, welcome, worship, and get comfortable. Then ask someone to read the passage out loud slowly.

Keep a time of quiet and then get a different voice to read it again, preferably in a different translation.

Ask what people have noticed either in reading it together or as they have read or listened to it in the week.

Discuss what people say, and if it is useful use some or all of the following questions.

- How do we know if we are hearing God speak, and understand what He is saying?
- How do we stay focussed on God's work, rather than ours?
- Where is it hard to trust God in the stuff we are facing, hearing, or learning?
- How have we responded?
- What have we seen God do whilst we faff around working out what the call is?
- What else might He be saying to us?
- What do you suspect, fear, or hope God is calling us to do in service of growth in your context, local church, and more widely as the church family in the Diocese of Chester? How might we name it?

You might also like to use one or more of the Jonah-prompted resources described below (page 154) as part of your group time each week.

SAMPLE OTHER RESOURCES

Jonah-Prompted Resources

As we have worked on this material various resources have arisen which may be useful to others.

Untidy Prayer

One of the features of Jonah is his 'untidy praying' (to use Jenny's phrase). This is honest, open, raw, and real, and I wondered if we could try it (on the staff residential when she described this). I offered four guidelines and was deeply moved at our praying together in the middle of pre-planned Morning Prayer the next day.

The principles were:

- Start your sentence with a feeling word ('I am angry at…', It makes me happy to hear…', 'I don't understand…'),
- Don't say 'Amen' at the end (as this tidies up prayer),
- You can only use one breath for what you say (keep it short and unfussy), and
- If two people start talking together both carry on!

Then I introduced the following four sections, and after a few untidy prayers said something like 'Lord in Your mercy', to which everyone responded 'Hear our prayer'.

- I invited people to respond to the readings we had just heard,
- I read them the first six headlines from the feed on my phone's News app,
- I read out the Diocesan Cycle of Prayer entry for the day, and
- I invited them to notice who had 'set up camp in their heart at the moment for whatever reason'.

Why not give it a go?

10-Second Sermons

Jonah's 'sermon' wouldn't get past any preaching course I have ever attended or taught… but it is deeply focussed and real. Here's a similar game that can be played with any age:

- What's the one thing that you think God is saying to you/us today, especially when we have read this bit of Jonah?
- How do you say that in 10 seconds?
- Can you rise to the challenge of saying it out to someone else in the next 24 hours and tell us what happened tomorrow?