

# **BIBLE STORIES WE THOUGHT WE KNEW .....**

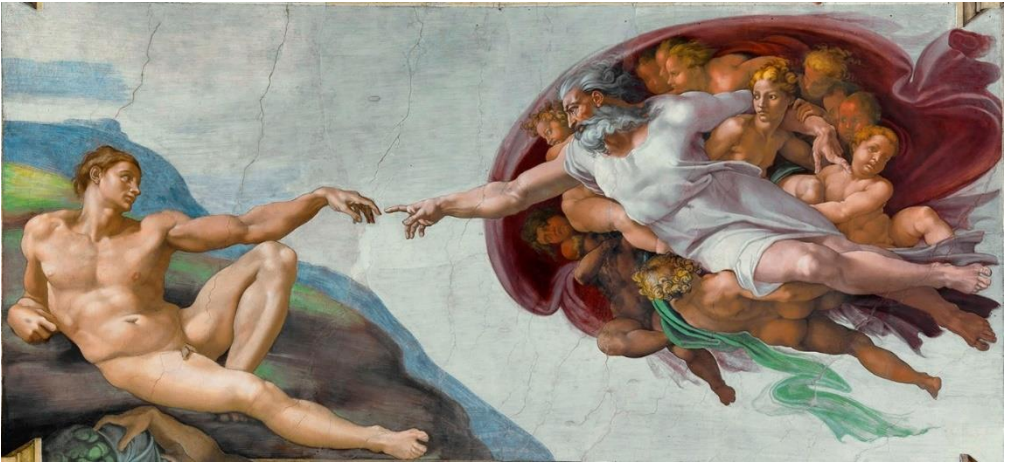
*Five Bible stories which we might have learnt as children, but perhaps have not thought about much since. This Lent course invites us to take a look again through adult eyes.....*

- *Adam and Eve*
- *Noah's Ark*
- *Samson*
- *Jonah*
- *Daniel in the Lions' Den*

*A Welwyn Team Lent Course 2019*

Session 1: Adam and Eve





*The Creation of Adam* depicted in the Sistine Chapel by artist Michelangelo.

This fresco painting forms part of the ceiling in the Sistine Chapel and is sited next to *The Creation of Eve*, which is the panel at the centre of the room. Unlike the figure of God, who is outstretched and aloft, Adam is depicted as a lounging figure who rather lackadaisically responds to God's imminent touch.

- God and Adam, despite having their arms outstretched, are not touching. What do we think Michelangelo is trying to depict by this very conscious decision?
- Unusually for Western paintings of Creation at the time, God is depicted as wearing a light tunic which leaves much of his body exposed, as opposed to wearing royal garments and depicted as an all-powerful ruler. What can we infer about God because of this? Is this a political comment from the artist who would have been acutely aware of the wave of reformation sweeping across the Church in Europe?
- If we look closely at the figures next to God in the floating (almost womb-like) nebulous, we can see angels who fly without wings, and a woman held close to God and under his arm. Some critics argue that this figure is Eve, waiting to be created from Adam's rib. More recently, however, a theory has been suggested that this is actually the Virgin Mary, who takes this place of honour next to God and the child next to her, who would therefore be the Christ Child.

What similarities can be drawn from the Creation story of Adam and Eve, and the Virgin Mary giving birth to Christ?

Please read all of chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis. Here are some highlights.

*The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. <sup>8</sup> And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup> Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree. The tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

*<sup>15</sup> The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup> And the Lord God commanded the man, “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for if you eat of it you shall die.”*

*<sup>18</sup> Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone. <sup>19</sup> So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup> And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup> Then the man said,*

*“...this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”*

**3** *God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” <sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; <sup>5</sup> for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” <sup>6</sup> So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. <sup>7</sup> The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” <sup>12</sup> The man said, “The woman gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” <sup>14</sup> The Lord God said to the serpent: “Because you have done this, dust you shall eat all the days of your life.*

*<sup>16</sup> To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” <sup>17</sup> And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*

## Commentary

2: 1-8: Everything was ready for man's use, every fruit-bearing tree for his nourishment, every creature to do his bidding, for it was the will of God that he should "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." God did not place the man formed in his image, after his likeness, in an unfurnished house or an empty world, and leave him to provide for himself all that he required but he prepared everything that man could possibly need, and completed the whole plan by planting "a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed."

9 That tree of life in the midst of the earthly paradise was to be symbolic of another tree of life in the paradise above, from which the children of God shall never be driven as Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden.

10-14: That river in Eden also reminds us of the "pure river of water of life clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb," of which we read almost at the end of the Revelation that was given to John in Patmos. Thus the beginning and the end of the Bible call our attention to the tree of life and the river of life in the paradise below and the better paradise above.

18-23 God's creating woman out of man has long been the root of theological disagreements about the superiority of the male gender in creation over women.

24-25 A favourite for weddings, this passage talks of the joining together of male and female to become one flesh. Is the writers aim to speak of marriage, or family and vulnerability more generally?

Chapter 3: Central elements in the authors presentation of human tragedy are the related ideas of forbidden knowledge and the loss of immortality. In the period this was written, the essential knowledge of for man, and the knowledge which set Israel apart from other nations, was the knowledge of God.

It is no coincidence that it is a serpent which tempts the woman. Serpents have had a role in mythology, and has gone on to become a symbol in Scripture. In Christian symbolism the serpent has gone on to become a symbol of evil. In Greek mythology the serpent is connected with the underworld, with reincarnation, because of the snakes ability to change its skin.

The fatal act of disobedience is committed, the free, happy, and content relationship between man and God is broken and the curse falls. The serpent becomes the age-long enemy of both man and God; the incarnate symbol of evil.

19: We heard these words on Ash Wednesday. What do these words mean for us? Are these comforting words or words which make us afraid?

The Fall brought about sin into the world; through Adam and Eve the first sin committed by the two has been transmitted to all their descendants as original sin. It is recognised as sin acquired by the unity of all humans in Adam rather than a personal sin. We all partake in the effects of original sin – that is one of the reasons we have baptism.

Questions for discussion:

- Original sin has long been a contentious issue, not just for Anglicans, but for many denominations. The Church teaches that baptism removes original sin, hence we have infant baptism despite children not having the capacity to commit any personal sin.

In the baptism service, immediately after the signing with the cross, the priest gives a (lite) exorcism: “May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness, and restore in you the image of his glory, and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ.”

What is our understanding of original sin, and does/can baptism remove this burden from our souls?

- There is something about the story of Adam and Eve which connects us all in the ongoing narrative of Creation – our shared humanity. What then does it mean to be created ‘in the image of God’ and how should we respond to difference?
- On Ash Wednesday, at the imposition of ashes, the words “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ” are said at the time of imposition, words which are echoed in Gen 3: 19. Does this annual ritual connect us to Adam and Eve, and can dust ever give us hope?

Prayer to conclude:

You might like to say together the Cantic of Creation written by St Francis of Assisi...

**O Most High, all-powerful, good Lord God,  
to you belong praise, glory, honour and all blessing.  
Be praised, my Lord, for all your creation  
and especially for our Brother Sun,  
who brings us the day and the light;  
he is strong and shines magnificently.  
O Lord, we think of you when we look at him.  
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon,  
and for the stars which you have set shining and lovely  
in the heavens.  
Be praised, my Lord, for our Brothers Wind and Air  
and every kind of weather by which you, Lord,  
uphold life in all your creatures.  
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water,  
who is very useful to us,  
and humble and precious and pure.  
Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,  
through whom you give us light in the darkness:  
he is bright and lively and strong.  
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Earth, our Mother,  
who nourishes us and sustains us,  
bringing forth fruits and vegetables of many kinds  
and flowers of many colours.  
Be praised, my Lord,  
for those who forgive for love of you;  
and for those who bear sickness and weakness  
in peace and patience  
- you will grant them a crown.  
Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Death,  
whom we must all face.  
I praise and bless you, Lord, and I give thanks to you,  
and I will serve you in all humility.**

Session 2: Noah and the Flood







*'Noah's Ark' Ted Burnett Cubist painting (Tennessee 1908 – 1982)*

Look at this picture in its chaos and colour. What do you believe the artist is trying to express though it about the event of the flood? What images can you make out? Do you like it? How does it make you feel?

The story of Noah is quite long – spread over the four chapters of Genesis 6-9. It will take about 15 minutes to read. Here are some highlights below:

*When people began to multiply on the face of the ground...the Lord said 'My spirit shall not abide in them for ever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years'... The Nephilim were on the earth in those days ...when the sons of God went into the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown. The Lord saw that the wickedness of human kind was great in the earth...and it grieved his heart. So the Lord said 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created'... but Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord.*

*God said to Noah 'Make yourself an ark of cypress wood...I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth...everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come out of the ark, you, your sons, your wife and your son's wives. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark'... Noah did this; he did all that God commanded. Then the Lord said to Noah...'Go into the ark, you and all your household for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate...for in seven days I will send rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground'... In the six-hundredth year of Noah's life... the rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights...they went into the ark with Noah...and the Lord shut him in. The waters swelled above the mountains...and all flesh died that moved on the earth...only Noah was left and those that were in the ark. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters had abated; and ... the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. At the end of forty days Noah opened the window and sent out the raven... then he sent out the dove but the dove found no place to set its foot...so he waited another seven days and sent the dove and it did not return to him anymore... So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. And every animal, every creeping thing and every bird...went out of the ark by families. Then Noah built an altar to the Lord...God said to Noah.. 'as for me I am establishing a covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood... when the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remembering the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth'.*

## Commentary:

‘The animals went in two by two Hurrah! Hurrah!..’

The story of Noah’s ark has been a favourite of children’s story books for generations. It has had great use in helping children sound animal names and noises, for learning to count (well to two at least) and for the reciting of the colours of the rainbow. For this reason, if nothing else, it has seemed a more than appropriate tale to fill up colourful story books for the smallest of child. But if we look carefully at this biblical text we discover not such a suitable story for bedtime reading, but more a mythical but sophisticatedly structured tale about God’s faithfulness, mercy and ability to recreate.

6: 1-4 The reference to the Nephilim, those mystical giants, who are commonly thought of as the result of relations between fallen angels and human women, is a sign of the age of this story and the mythical era from which it evolved. Older versions of this tale are known from neighbouring civilisations (Sumerian, Atrahasis and Gilgamesh) with a number of similarities. But it is the differences, between those ancient tales and these early accounts in Genesis, that give insight into the uniqueness of this this new revelation of God. Here there is only one God, not multiple goddesses. Here the flood was caused by God’s sorrow at human sin and his anger at human violence, rather than simply whimsical irritation at human noise (!) such as in the Mesopotamian accounts. This God, Genesis tells us, is sovereign in power and omniscient. The gods of the surrounding orient ‘cower in the corner like dogs’ after unleashing their flood, whereas the God of Genesis, who remembering Noah, does not fear, but rather has the power to recede the waters.

The story, although most likely a merging of two accounts (see the contradictions in 6:19 and 7:2), has a chiastic (see NB) structure both in the actions of God and also revealed in the use of symbolic numbers (compare the illustrations below). This literary motif shows the central emphasis of the story to be God’s remembering of Noah; divine concern for a human being.

6:15 The height of Noah’s ark is the same as later instructions for the tabernacle, the latter then becomes a mirror vehicle of refuge and salvation.

6:19-7:3 The saving act of God is for all of creation’s creatures. The repetition showing solemnity and care in the gathering.

7:16 In the Gilgamesh epic it is the hero Utnapishtim who shuts the door. Here we see it is God. The final act of salvation will always be God's grace, not our own efforts.

8:1-5 God remembers Noah, the turning point from destruction to restoration. Ararat is roughly in northern Armenia.

8:6-14 In Gilgamesh there are three birds. Here we have two, which scholars have suggested may be a sign of Noah's impatience to return to the earth.

8:20 – 22 In Gilgamesh the sacrifice was to feed the hungry gods, here Noah offers sacrifice to show gratitude to God and to please him. The phrase 'pleasing odour' is often used in Leviticus when sacrifices are offered for the atonement of the worshipper. Here then we see a sacrifice made for all people for all time, as God declares to never again 'curse the ground because of humankind' and his covenant is established with Noah's descendants and 'with every living creature' (9:9ff).

9:14-15 Usually signs and symbols are there to remind people of God's promises. Here the rainbow is a sign so that God will remember.

NB: 'Chiastic' just means a format which is as though it had a mirror or pivot in the middle. The middle 'saying' is often the climax of the story. Moving outward from that middle the sayings 'mirror' each other. Often expressed in form A B C... M ...C' B' A' – see diagram

7 days	(7:4)
7 days	(7:10)
40 days	(7:17)
150 days	(7:24)
GOD REMEMBERED NOAH	(8:1)
150 days	(8:3)
40 days	(8:6)
7 days	(8:10)
7 days	(8:12)

#### Chiastic Outline of the Account of Noah\*

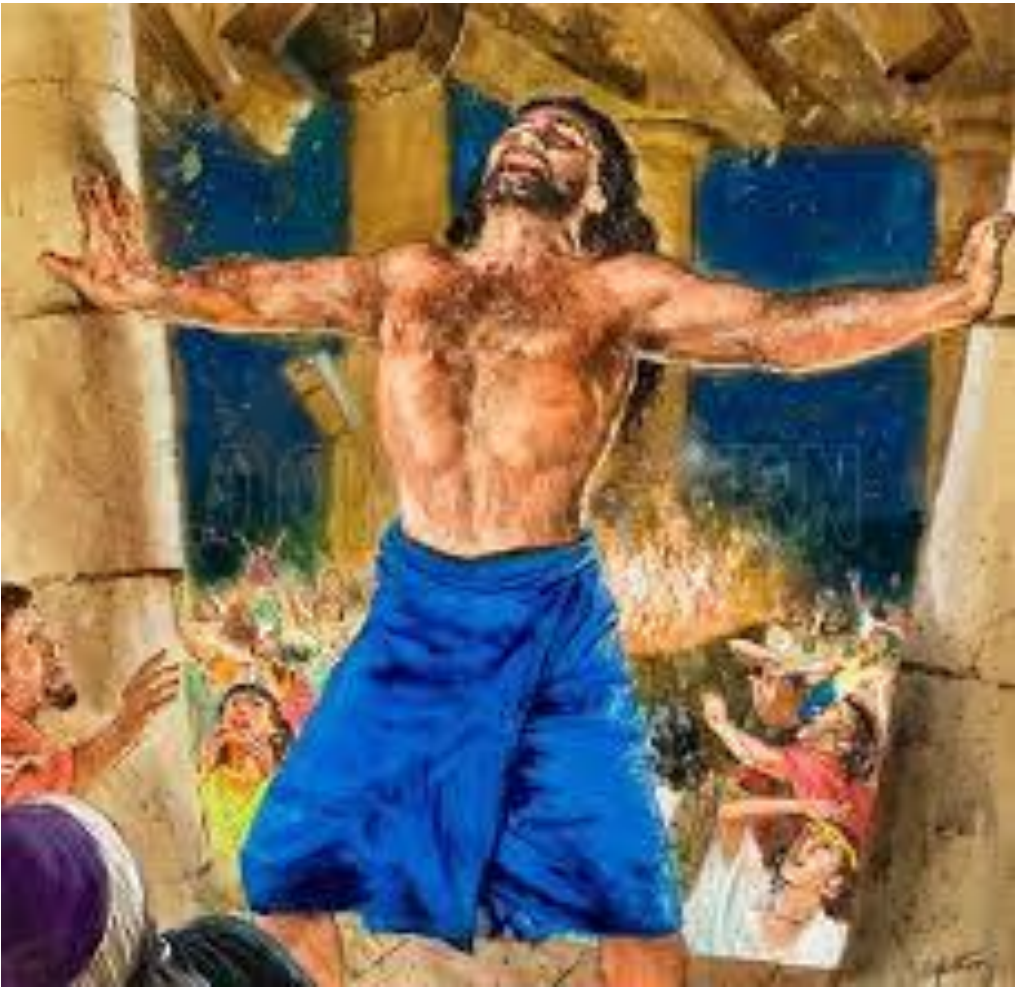
6:9-10	Transitional intro
6:11-12	A Violence in God's creation
6:13-22	B God's resolution to destroy
7:1-10	C Command to enter ark
7:11-16	D Beginning of the flood
7:17-24	E The rising flood waters
	GOD'S REMEMBRANCE OF NOAH
8:1-5	E' The receding flood waters
8:6-14	D' Drying of the earth
8:15-19	C' Command to leave the ark
8:20-22	B' God's resolution to preserve
9:1-17	A' Blessing in God's creation
9:18-19	Transitional Conclusion

\* adapted from S. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, p. 102

For discussion:

- 1) In this story God consistently includes animals, fish and birds in his mode of salvation, his re-creation and future promise. How do you see animals as part of God's final act of salvation? Is heaven for all of creation or simply human souls? How do you think this story can speak to us today about a Christian care for creatures? How well do we do?
- 2) On occasion the media may report a Christian voice proclaiming times of flood, earthquake or famine as a sign of God's judgement against a particular community. Do you think this is ever the case? Is there anyway in these modern times we might see changing climate, rising sea levels and local flooding as a consequence of human sin? Should we as Christians be doing/saying more about environmental concerns? If so what?
- 3) Can this story be looked at as an historical account? If a Christian sees this story as mythological does that devalue its truth?

Session 3: Samson and Delilah





The Death of Samson - unknown artist  
(probably Italian, date c.1650)  
The J Paul Getty Museum, New York



## Bible passage for study of Samson - Judges 16: 15-31

*Then [Delilah] said to [Samson], ‘How can you say, “I love you”, when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me three times now and have not told me what makes your strength so great.’ Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death. So he told her his whole secret, and said to her, ‘A razor has never come upon my head; for I have been a nazirite to God from my mother’s womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me; I would become weak, and be like anyone else.’*

*When Delilah realized that he had told her his whole secret, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, ‘This time come up, for he has told his whole secret to me.’*

*Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and brought the money in their hands. She let him fall asleep on her lap; and she called a man, and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. He began to weaken, and his strength left him. Then she said, ‘The Philistines are upon you, Samson!’ When he awoke from his sleep, he thought, ‘I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free.’ But he did not know that the Lord had left him. So the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles; and he ground at the mill in the prison. But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.*

*Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon, and to rejoice; for they said, ‘Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand.’*

*When the people saw him, they praised their god; for they said, ‘Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us.’ And when their hearts were merry, they said, ‘Call Samson, and let him entertain us.’ So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. They made him stand between the pillars; and Samson said to the attendant who held him by the hand, ‘Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them.’ Now the house was full of men and women; all the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about three thousand men and women, who looked on while Samson performed. Then Samson called to the Lord and said, ‘Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.’ And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. Then Samson said, ‘Let me die with the Philistines.’ He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life. Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel for twenty years.*

## Commentary

Samson is probably the best known of the “judges” that appear in the OT book of this name. He is also single-handedly responsible for the most deaths of Israel’s enemies at the time. His story presents particular challenges to Christians and others who proclaim a God of love and who seek peace and reconciliation, rather than revenge.

The book of Judges spans the period in Israel’s history from the early occupation of the Promised Land, after the death of Joshua, until the appointment by the prophet Samuel of the first king Saul. Historically, it is difficult to be exact about the time frame, but it is likely to be 200-300 years, from c.1300-1000BC. The judges themselves are rulers of sorts. They appear to act in two ways: acting as God’s judge to settle disputes between Israel’s tribes and acting as God’s judge over Israel’s enemies. Samson falls into the latter category as a deliverer-judge.

In the Jewish Scriptures even today, the books of Joshua to 2 Kings are known as the “Former Prophets” - traditionally thought to have been written by prophets, but more importantly because they are prophetic in style and content (not just history). This important concept should colour the way we read the story of Samson. This whole section of Israel’s “history” is concerned with how God’s special relationship with his chosen people is expressed in the judgement and salvation of the nation. Samson’s own story may also be read as a microcosm of God’s dealings with Israel as a whole.

The book of Judges records a repeated cycle of sin, oppression, deliverance, and (brief) revival. “The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” is a repeated refrain in the book. The final verse in the whole book provides the comment: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit”. It is suggested that the actual compilation of the book comes from a time of peace and prosperity under a godly king. Whatever the date of writing, the book of Judges depicts an unsavoury period in Israel’s history. The final editor of Judges does not necessarily approve of all the actions taken by the protagonists within the book’s pages. However, God is shown as working through an intransigent people to fulfil his purposes for them.

What of Samson himself? His birth is miraculous - he is born to a barren woman after an angelic visitation. Compare the birth of Isaac to Sarah in the book of Genesis (and other wondrous conceptions, including that of Jesus). From conception, Samson is to be set apart as a Nazarite = consecrated or dedicated;

separated to the Lord. Three conditions applied to Nazarites (found in Numbers 6 vv1-6). They were not to drink the fruit of the vine, not as grapes or raisins, nor as juice or wine; they were not to cut their hair; they were not to touch a corpse. The Nazarite vow was usually taken voluntarily for a limited period. But Samson's commitment was imposed on him - he was "chosen" by God to be a Nazarite - and it was lifelong. Samson broke all three of the conditions laid upon him, but you'd have to read his whole story in Judges chapters 13-16 to discover how.

At times, the "spirit of the Lord" came upon Samson, and endowed him with supernatural strength (14:19, 15:14). He used this gift to escape those threatening him and to wreak vengeance. It seems that endowment with the Holy Spirit is not necessarily linked to the ability to use God's gifts wisely. In the Old Testament, the spirit was not given as a permanent possession, or indwelling (this took place at the first Christian Pentecost), but was given at particular moments to particular people. Samson (as later Saul) discovered that the Lord "had left him" when the last of the 3 Nazirite conditions was broken (16:20) Submission to a haircut could be seen as Samson's ultimate rejection of his calling, and the Lord's rejection of him (only to be restored as Samson died).

Samson knows that he is Nazirite - set apart from others to be of service to God - but he appears to struggle with this calling. In this, he mirrors the nation of Israel as a whole. He wants to live as other men do, in the way that Israel wants to be indistinguishable from other nations. He goes after prostitutes and foreign women, as Israel prostitutes its worship to foreign gods. He calls on the Lord only out of desperation, as his people do only when they are in deep trouble. His captivity reflects the oppression and exile experienced by Israel down the centuries. The climax of the Samson's story demonstrates the superiority of Israel's God over all other gods and marks the beginning of Israel's deliverance from Philistine domination (as promised at his conception 13:5) - a deliverance that is only completed under King David. Is it too much to see Samson and Israel as prefiguring the Church, wayward and unpredictable, but still used by God, but whose ultimate deliverance is brought by Jesus, the Son of David?

For discussion: “Bad theology can make people kill each other”.

What do you see in the pictures of Samson given here? What different impressions do you get of him as a character?

What do you remember about the story of Samson from childhood?

How did you view him? As a superhero or superthug?

How did your childhood memory of Samson shape your view of God at that time?

In what ways do you struggle with the story of Samson now?

How does the suggestion in the notes that Samson was a man who wrestled with his calling, rejected it, but ultimately re-discovered it, sit with you?

Do you find it helpful to think of Samson as a flawed man of God? Try to identify his flaws, but also his better features?

It is further suggested that the one man, Samson, reflects the turmoil of his nation, Israel, in relation to God and the surrounding nations. The story is classified by some as “prophetic history” - that God’s people are to find their own story (and God addressing them) through the story of Samson. What do you think of this idea?

Samson was called to be a Nazirite - to live differently from others in his own community. How far do you think Christians are called to live differently from others in our own society? In what ways do you find this a struggle?

What hope do you find within the story of Samson for your own walk with God?

Samson could be wrongly understood as a role model for a suicide bomber. As the Revd Dr Helen Paynter wrote in a Church Times article, 1 Feb 2019, “Bad theology can make people kill each other”. Are there other stories of violence in the Bible that you would like to re-visit?

How do you feel about the way the male and female characters are portrayed in Samson’s story?

## Session 4: Jonah



Pieter Lastman 1621



It is entirely possible to read the entire book of Jonah in 15 minutes or so, so have some bibles ready. However if you want a page of edited highlights.....

*1 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> ‘Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ <sup>3</sup> But Jonah set out 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 his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.*

*<sup>4</sup> But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ...*

*.. <sup>12</sup> He said to them, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.’  
.....<sup>17</sup> But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.*

*.....<sup>10</sup> Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.*

*3 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ ....He cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

*....<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.*

*4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. <sup>3</sup> And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ <sup>4</sup> And the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ <sup>5</sup> Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there.*

*..<sup>6</sup> The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. <sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered.*

*....<sup>10</sup> Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’*

‘Well Jonah he lived in a Whale ....’

Of all bible stories, perhaps the one that suffers most from learning it as a child and never revisiting it, is that of Jonah. After all once you know about Jonah and the whale, what else is there to know?

But Jonah is a story full of twists and turns, and the bit about the whale is in some ways the least interesting of these. *Why* Jonah ends up in a whale *is* interesting, perhaps more so than questions about whether he really lived in a whale, or if it is possible generally for people to survive inside a whale (and yes the word can also mean large fish, not that it makes it any more likely).

2 Kings 14:25 mentions in passing Jonah ben Amittai, though we are not sure that he is ‘our’ Jonah. Most scholars date the book to the C5th BC, and the tone of the book – which is generous towards foreigners – is in contrast to a movement within Judaism that tended towards exceptionalism and isolation (see Ezra and Nehemiah).

Jonah is sent off to Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian empire, and a by-word for the wickedness of the big city. Understandably Jonah is not keen to go and confront the Assyrians, but heads off for Tarshish, about the most westerly point known (in Spain). Ninevah lies far to the east. We note the multinational nature of the boat crew. God however has other ideas and arranges for a storm which threatens to sink the boat. The crew acknowledges (NB foreigners converting) the power of God, and after a short debate acquiesce to Jonah’s unusual request to be thrown overboard. Enter whale stage right.....

The whale swallows up Jonah for three days (Christians note, three days ...) and spews him up on the coast just a little bit down from, yes you’ve guessed it, Ninevah.

Jonah now reluctantly accepts the inevitability of his mission and heads to Ninevah. Its size is obviously exaggerated as no ancient city was 60 miles across. Historically unless we date the writing much earlier, the whole book is a ‘story from old times’ as Ninevah was destroyed in 612BC.

Amazingly Jonah’s mission is achieved with comical ease. Five Hebrew words convince the people and the King of their wickedness. They turn not only from evil to good, but also actively towards Yahweh, the God who has brought Jonah to



them. Again we might note that there is a comical undertone here for effect: would animals really be made to don sackcloth and ashes (3:8)?

At 3:10 we have the phrase ‘God changed his mind.’ Problematic for those who have a Greek view of divinity as unchanging and unpitying, but entirely in sympathy with the biblical God of compassion and forgiveness.

Now comes the punch line of the story in verse 4. Jonah had wanted to at least see some fireworks for all his efforts, a bit of fire and brimstone at the very least. So ironically he flees Ninevah not because of the scary Ninevites, but because he does not want to be associated with a God who is so easily pacified and full of forgiveness. Again we can’t but think that this is exaggerated for comic effect – Jonah indeed wants to *die* rather than live with a God who is quite so lenient (4:3). There is an ironic parallel with Elijah here (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah is the prophet who wants to die because he thinks his preaching has failed, Jonah wants to die because his preaching has succeeded!

Again it is difficult to imagine that we are not being offered a comic picture here. The next day God gives Jonah a castor oil plant. Actually hopelessly inadequate to give shade in the desert. But even that comfort is taken away by a nasty little worm, and Jonah is left to bear the heat of the sirocco wind from the east.

4:11 is the punchline of the whole book. Delivered by Yahweh to Jonah, to Israel and to us. God loves all of his creation. He loves all human beings and indeed animals as well. He continues to love them even when they are wicked and yearns for their repentance. He does not worry about what nationality they are. Strangely it is we who are often petty, and vengeful and self-righteous. In the Gospels the parables of the prodigal son and the workers in the vineyard take their cue from the prophet Jonah.

## Questions for discussion

Is it OK to find irony and comedy in the parable of Jonah the prophet?

What makes us feel self-righteous and unforgiving?

What or who is our Ninevah?

Do we need to make the message of this book agree with other books in the Bible (eg Ezra and Nehemiah)? Or does the Bible sometimes model 'good disagreement' for us, and invite us to look deeper?

Imagine you are Jonah – how do you feel at each stage of the story? Do you have sympathy with what Jonah is feeling?

The title of this week is a line from the George Gershwin song – 'The things that you're li'ble to read in the Bible, ain't necessarily so.' You might like to listen to it. It reminds us that if we *only* know the fantastical parts of a story that we have learnt as children, then when we grow up to be adults, we might be tempted to dismiss those stories as *just* for children. But as with lots of *good* children's literature, by looking more deeply as adults we see more interesting and profound truths in those stories.

## Session 5: Daniel in the Lion's Den





Daniel in the Lions' Den – Peter Paul Rubens

Again this week it is easy to read Daniel 6 in 5 minutes, so have some bibles ready. But here are the edited highlights.

*6 It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, stationed throughout the whole kingdom, <sup>2</sup> and over them three presidents, including Daniel; to these the satraps gave account, so that the king might suffer no loss. <sup>3</sup> Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom. <sup>4</sup> So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom.*

*.....<sup>6</sup> So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, 'O King Darius, live for ever! <sup>7</sup> All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors and the governors, are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. <sup>8</sup> Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.' <sup>9</sup> Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.*

*.... <sup>11</sup> The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God....*

*...<sup>14</sup> When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed....*

*...<sup>16</sup> Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, 'May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!' ..... Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting.*

*<sup>19</sup> Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. <sup>20</sup> When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, 'O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?' <sup>21</sup> Daniel then said to the king, 'O king, live for ever! ..... <sup>24</sup> The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions.*

*<sup>28</sup> So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.*

According to the Laws of the Medes and the Persians....

Churches are often ruled by rotas. And as one who often compiles rotas there is nothing more annoying than people changing / complaining about / dropping out of your beautifully constructed rota. So when the final version of any rota is sent out, I add 'this is now the law of the Medes and Persians', hoping that the recipients will get the reference .... To the book of the Daniel. Because the point of the law of the Medes and Persians, is that once promulgated it 'cannot be changed.'

The book of Daniel is a book of two halves. The first half narrates the defeat of the Babylonian empire by the Persians (very much the baddies and goodies respectively, of empires ruling of Judea in the Old Testament). This half ends with the story of Daniel in the lion's den in chapter 6. The second half of the book is very different, a series of apocalyptic visions, paralleled in the New Testament by Revelation. Unusually much of the first part of Daniel seems to have been originally in Aramaic rather than Hebrew.

There is however an historical puzzle here. Although Darius was the name of several Persian emperors, (including Darius the Great, mentioned several times in Ezra) the Babylonian empire passed straight into the hands of Cyrus in 539BC. The Median empire had already been absorbed into the Persian empire in 550BC. Notably Isaiah 45 assumes that Cyrus liberated the Jews in exile without reference to Darius. Incidentally the idea of a lions' den for punishing law-breakers in ancient near-Eastern civilisations is unknown outside of the story of Daniel.

We note that the Jews, including Daniel in particular, are liberated and flourishing under Persian rule. There is no criticism of the Persians or their gods. As the Jews flourish, so as in the book of Esther, it is jealousy that moves others to plot against them, in this case the other satraps and presidents appointed by the King.

We note that the law is applied only for 'thirty days' (7), perhaps indicating it was unrealistic to enforce a permanent ban. However that would not worry the plotters as they had noted that Daniel's piety meant he prayed three times every day (the Mishnah, a rabbinic document from C3CE, stipulates this pattern of prayer).

The idea of a law that cannot be changed, thus duping and cornering an unwitting King is repeated from the book of Esther. We note that the writer continues to be sympathetic to the predicament of the King, trapped by jealous officials. The King's fasting make us think he hopes or even expects Daniel to be saved. We note there

is an angel in the rescue. The punishment of the plotters is perhaps to be expected, though the addition of the wives and children to the lions' den may not gain sympathy with a modern reader.

Ironically for the hapless plotters the King's final decree is a doxology in praise of Yahweh.

### Questions

Is it possible to be as honest *and* as successful as Daniel in today's world?

How do we make laws that are flexible enough to allow for changed circumstances, and promote freedom and toleration?

Who would we like to see thrown into the lions' den?

The King obviously felt trapped, even though he was just and good – have we ever felt trapped like that ourselves?

## **Lent Groups 2019**

**(Groups start after the first Sunday of Lent –  
there are five weeks in the course)**

### **Monday 8pm, 60 Orchard Road, Tewin,**

Led by Susannah Underwood, 01438 817183

### **Tuesday 7.30 – St Michael's Woolmer Green group**

First session @St Michael's House, 3 London Road, Woolmer Green, SG3 6JU, then peripatetic,

Led by Dominic Holroyd-Thomas, Colin and Usha Hull, 01438 813043

### **Wednesday 10.30am St Mary's New Church House,**

Led by David Munchin, 01438 714150

### **Wednesday 7.45 for 8pm, 1 Codicote Road, Welwyn,**

Led by Gay and Mike Carpenter 01438 718439

### **Wednesday 8pm**

#### **All Saints Church Hall, Datchworth,**

Led by Susannah Underwood and Catherine Jupp, 01438 817183

### **Thursday afternoon and evening**

#### **Various locations**

Led by different church members. More information from the Rev'd Philip Waller 01438 504318

Groups will study the subject of resilience as a Christian disciple.

### **Friday 9.30am Time for God Group**

Contact Margot Kenworthy, 01438 718732