A Meditation on Jonah

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I

IN the year 1792, a young Baptist minister in Kettering, England, published a slender volume entitled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen.* It represented a deliberate onslaught upon the official policy of British churches in his day, inasmuch as they generally assumed that missionary enterprise was no necessary expression of the Gospel.

The Book of Jonah is such an *Enquiry*, composed in a similar crisis in the religious history of Israel. It appeared, it would seem, at a time when the considered aim of the Jewish Church was to separate the pious worshipper from contact with all contaminating agencies. Nehemiah and Ezra in turn had envisaged the creation of a new nation-church, whose purity would be fashioned and maintained by immunity from non-Jewish fellowship, and rejection of evangelical responsibility. Against this self-satisfied and unimaginative view that God had no concern with remote or alien people, the writer of Jonah depicts Him as deeply concerned for the inhabitants of distant and wicked Nineveh. To the arrogant insistence that only Israel is called of God he replies that Jonah is called to be a missionary to the barbarous East. His graphic plea is a worthy predecessor of William Carey's classic *Enquiry.*

II

Jonah, it is narrated, rebels against his prophetic and evangelical mission. For unstated reasons he seeks to evade his commission. Carey, with grim realism, depicts the common demurrers of his generation to any missionary proposal. Men are deterred, even when they have begun to acknowledge the validity of the missionary claim, by the distances to be travelled, by the need to live among uncouth peoples, by the dangers attendant upon life in a primitive society, by the prospect of unpalatable food, and by the supreme difficulty of language. Carey ruthlessly demolishes each successive argument, and insists that Christ's command to proclaim the Gospel in every land carries inescapable responsibility with it. So imperative an order Jonah receives from his God, but he sees fit to reject it.

Jonah's flight from this ultimate responsibility may be natural to men. It corresponds to Isaiah's portraiture of them as rebelling against God their Father. It is echoed in Francis Thompson's reluctance to capitulate to the absolute claim of that "tremendous lover" who pursued him with imperious plea, and in his attempted escape from "those swift feet that followed, followed after." It is symbolized in Augustine's judgment on his own vain

endeavour to enjoy life without God; "Woe to my soul with its rash hope of finding something better if it forsook Thee."

Jonah, however, discovers, as Francis Thompson discovered, that "all things betray thee who betrayest Me." Events conspire against God's chosen servant who refuses to acknowledge his Master's right to command. This is the obverse of the spiritual rule that they who seek God's kingdom first have all other things added to them, for rejection of God's approach brings in its train the relentless antagonism of events, the total dislocation of one's life. It is a fearful thing, truly commented the writer to the Hebrews, to fall into the hands of a living God. Amos was right when he portrayed those in wrong relation to God as unable to find rest or peace even in the depths of the sea.

In this remorseless sequence of decision and nemesis, Jonah finds his flight to Tarshish prejudiced by a storm. The calamity provokes the natural, if unconsciously cynical, response of man to disaster, that he turn to God for deliverance. "All lost! To prayers, to prayers! All lost!" cry the sailors in *The Tempest*. So the mariners in Jonah's vessel call upon their God. The *deus ex machina* is not less a spontaneous hope of the human heart, than a dramatic device of the Greek tragedians.

The sailors interpret their calamity as the consequence of sin. The moral realm impinges on the natural, and its effects impair the helpful functioning of nature. In addition, it is assumed that by the sin of one, discord and ruin become the lot of many. From this impasse, escape is possible only by the forcible ejection of the offender. By the sin of one, death enters into life: by the death of one, life will return to all.

This picture of the intricate inter-relationship between men needs no endorsement. The ravages of an Attila or a Genghis Khan, the creative impact of a Francis of Assisi, a John Wesley, or a Gandhi, illustrate laterally and lineally the communication of evil and of good. The agonizing sense of political responsibility in the racial tensions of the Deep South of the United States, or the consciousness of collective guilt in modern Germany, demonstrate the moral nemesis of sin. Whether nature itself, in its more impersonal modes as distinct from its human aspect in the body of man, can function within the ambit of a moral, disciplinary governance of life, may be difficult to determine, but if nature is totally severed from God, the universe, as H. H. Farmer has argued, becomes dichotomized. Some sustained contact must therefore be postulated or envisaged between God and the realm of nature.

It must however be remembered that not all human contingency can be directly ascribed to divine agency. Life contains a strange, baffling infusion of mystery, which, deriving from this very freedom of nature, seems to deny God's presence in His world, bequeathing to the mind an enigma not easily solved, and to the heart a burden not lightly borne. A young missionary of twenty-seven, who has trained himself sedulously, in language, theology, and life, to serve in Madagascar, becomes afflicted with a tropical disease

en route for his post, and reaches his destination only to be buried. A medical missionary dies in India at thirty-six from lack of salt in her body, after seven years of unremitting toil, for the sake of which she had renounced a useful and not unprofitable business career. Yet, notwithstanding these instances, and the principle of natural liberty which they embody, and the theological query they raise about the actuality of divine government, it is necessary to affirm, because it is impossible to escape, the strict nemesis which attends betrayal, disloyalty, and rebelliousness before God's behests. No matter how bewildering or how poignant may be the tragic sense of life, faith in a God who educates us for His purposes cannot exclude His varied approach to our lives, by nature, as by man, and by His own direct constraint.

III

The writer of Jonah knows that God will not renounce His claim to His chosen servants. Not only is Jonah pursued when he plots escape: he is swallowed by the "whale" in order that he may be returned to *terra firma*, and receive a second call which he may have the wisdom to accept. The crucial truth in this episode is not the accommodation of nature to divine commands, but the unfailing and magisterial character of God's purposes in His Kingdom. Thus it is not enough to bear in mind, as R. F. Horton suggests, that we do not ask whether these images are true, any more than we may ask whether the images in the *Pilgrim's Progress* are true. Nor is it legitimate to quote Frank Bullen in the enthralling story in his *Idylls of the Sea*, concerning a whaling hand who, washed overboard in a storm, and swallowed by a whale, emerged alive and comparatively unscathed from the monster when it was captured within twenty-four hours. Rather it is imperative that we mark the insistent intention of God, to compel Jonah to acknowledge and accept his missionary vocation, as He compels Jeremiah to capitulate to the constraint of a divine word, Livingstone to respond to the smoke of a thousand African kraals, Thomas Bridges to seek out the most degraded people on the face of earth, and to find them, on Darwin's testimony after his voyage in H.M.S. *Beagle*, in Tierra del Fuego.

Jonah shoulders his missionary task when God confronts him with it again. The gospel of a second chance is not unknown in the annals of devout Christians. Revival swept Britain some forty years ago, under the inspiration of a Baptist minister who at first refused to answer the call to a nation-wide evangelistic mission. Douglas Brown was fast losing health, spiritual power, and peace of mind before he finally decided that not even his fruitful ministry in Balham, London, must take precedence of this haunting summons. Not dissimilarly, Stanley Jones at first viewed with alarm and misgiving his commission to commend the Gospel to high-caste Hindus, yielding at last only to a strong inward assurance that, in resources of body, mind, and soul, he would be made equal to his task.

The task of Jonah, the story tells, was sufficiently testing to try both

courage and conviction. He was summoned to be a prophet of doom; he must pronounce judgment upon infamous Nineveh. This may well have been regarded as the authentic mark of a prophet in eighth and seventh century Israel, but at any time it taxes "heart and nerve and sinew." It may indeed constitute an integral part of Christian preaching. George Fox, the Quaker leader in England, once felt compelled, by the divine urgency in his soul, to go into the city now associated most with the name of Samuel Johnson, and utter against Lichfield fiery and passionate denunciation. True to his commission, he walked along its streets, proclaiming in stentorian tones the words of doom: "Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield!"

It is questionable how much penitence might be expected from such raucous and unsparing utterance. But the ratio between preaching and repentance does not depend merely upon positive presentation of truth. When John Wesley went as a missionary to the Indians of Georgia, he believed he had a distinctive message to proclaim, but neither it nor his humourless cataloguing of the sins of his audience availed to beget conversion. "I went to Georgia," he later wrote, "to convert the Indians, but who will convert me?"

It is told that the people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. They applied to themselves his words of condemnation, acknowledging their title to punishment. They bowed before the truth Amos long enunciated, that God is concerned with conduct, that piety must manifest itself in righteousness, that religion necessitates morality. This recognition, further, would not be rendered invalid if the motive of penitence was to avert calamity. Jesus depicts the prodigal as returning to his father because he wishes to escape the unsavoury consequences of his sin. A moral universe implies theologically significant nemesis. If the wages of sin is death, it is a death that is providentially designed to lead again to life. A generation unwilling to accept, perhaps, this disquieting phenomenon of painful education, may well illustrate the claim of C. S. Lewis that it is all too easy to conceive of God as a Grandfather in Heaven.

IV

Jonah is displeased at the very success of his preaching. The avoidance of calamity by a sequence of penitence and mercy seemed to him a violation of the basic canons of justice. Retribution, he reasons, must surely be an inescapable feature of reality. Thus he becomes angered by the divine compassion, because it seems to repudiate an ultimate category of his faith —that sinners should be punished. But justice is a two-edged sword. Portia's words to Shylock immortalize the precarious and damning nature of its judgments:

> Therefore, Jew,
> Though Justice be thy plea, consider this—
> That in the course of Justice none of us
> Should see salvation.

"Get Justice," said Emil Brunner, in a sermon in the chapel of St. Andrews University in Scotland, as he preached on the parable of the workers hired at successive hours of the day. "Get Justice, get hanged." Justice indeed bodes ill for Everyman; but the transcendence of justice frees and satisfies the soul. Its redemptive and supremely divine character was demonstrated once for all to C. F. Andrews when, in his youth, his parents took into their home, to love and cherish in his utter need, an old family friend who had betrayed a financial trust affecting them—a betrayal which caused no little impoverishment in their lives.

Jonah, perplexed, frustrated, angered, resentful, retires from the city to observe it in detachment. He has lost, if not indeed forfeited, the passion to preach; he has become a needy soul, requiring enlightenment and conversion. God proceeds to teach him, in the manner of the earlier prophets, by using dramatic symbolism. The gourd is not primarily an emblem of divine compassion; it is an instrument of instruction. God employs it to reveal Jonah to himself, to unmask the false, sentimental character of his sympathy, to set in disquieting contrast his concern for a short-lived gourd, and his total disregard for six-score thousand people, to pillory his deep feeling for a dying plant as compared with his indifference to lost humanity.

This, however, is the supreme glory of God. He is gravely anxious for the weal and destiny of all types of men; for the clod-like mass in Nineveh, who may reflect the truth expressed by Tennyson's *Northern Farmer* that "the poor in a lump is bad," not less or more than for the clever scoundrel or the diseased reprobate, for Al Capone or Oscar Wilde. It is His purpose, in Saul Kane's words in Masefield's *Everlasting Mercy*, "To brother all the souls on earth." This quality has been clearly discerned and neatly presented by C. S. Lewis. In *The Screwtape Letters* he depicts Screwtape, the Devil, as directing his nephew, Wormwood, in diabolical strategy against "The Enemy," God, who is ever alert to save the sons of men, but uses no weapons of earth or hell. "Always remember," says Screwtape, with that touch of fiendish insight which compels admiration and assent, "that he really likes the little vermin." From this love not even Nineveh can be excluded; for the fulfilment of its purpose Jonah too must be disciplined till he obeys the heavenly vision.