

Thought for the Day: 19 June

But the Lord said... 'Should I not be concerned about that great city?'

(Jonah 4.10-11)

The Book of Jonah in the Old Testament is numbered among the prophets, yet it is not so much a book of prophecy as a book about a prophet. Jonah appears as a very disobedient and grumpy servant of the Lord. First, having been told to call the citizens of Nineveh, the largest city in the world in his day, to repent of their sins, he sets off in the opposite direction and gets shipwrecked. God saves him from drowning and patiently gives him the same mission to Nineveh. This time he goes and tells them they have got forty days in which to repent or be destroyed. To his amazement everyone repents.

But now he is worried his credibility as a prophet has been ruined; for who knows if the people of Nineveh would really have been destroyed? He is cross with God and tries to justify his reluctance to obey at first: *I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.* (Jonah 4.2). His black mood continues as a quick-growing plant gives him shade from the scorching sun but dies overnight, so he is left without protection next day. He feels his life isn't worth living.

God now tells Jonah that he mourns the loss of one short-lived plant, but wishes the whole city of Nineveh had suffered destruction. Can he not see how God would mourn such a loss? The old Authorised Version of the Bible puts the words of the last verse in a different order, which gives us the force of God's compassion extending to, not only the 120,000 ignorant citizens, *but also much cattle.*

Jonah's greatest insight, though he doesn't know it, is that God is *gracious and compassionate..., slow to anger and abounding in love.*

Notice it is Jonah, not God, who gives the Ninevites forty days to repent.

Such a God, we may be sure, mourns over the loss of every person from Covid-19. It would be the same for anyone struck by lightning, lost at sea, or burnt to death. We don't live in a risk-free world, but we have the capacity to know God as our refuge. God's greatest sorrow is that so many choose to live without him, and prefer instead to find their own way.

John Tiller