

## **Donnybrook**

5 October 2021

### **Welcome**

I once had a student from Nineveh, an Iraqi Dominican sister, who introduced herself in this way: my name is Rosa, I'm from Nineveh, Jonah converted us. For once, I was stuck for words.

We are hearing these days from the book of Jonah. As you might have predicted, not too many scenes or stories in the Bible make their point by comedy. There is, however, one book is meant as serious comedy: the book of Jonah. It is very short – well worth reading as a whole perhaps some time this week.

### **Steps**

It tells the story of a prophet sent to a non-Jewish town, Nineveh. He is a very reluctant prophet who goes west by ship, instead of east. A storm leads to his being thrown overboard and he "rescued" by a huge fish, in whose belly he lives for a while. The prayers in this part of the book are a send-up, a pastiche of the Psalms of lament. This leads to our scene today – also comic because even the moo cows are supposed to do penance and convert, for their sins. Success leaves the prophet deeply disappointed, as he was looking forward to the fireworks of God's anger.

Towards the end of the book, Jonah speaks like this to God:

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.

You might wonder what's the point of all this. As often, it is humour which is deadly serious. At the time, there was a big swing in Judaism against foreigners, especially again foreign women and wives. God was the God only of the Jewish people and so on. Stuff we would recognise as Catholics. But the prophet was sent to Nineveh, to non-Jews, to proclaim God's word and even the mercy and compassion of God to them too. So the book is a powerful, very undermining manifest against any kind of exclusivism, any narrow nationalism, especially in the name of religion.

### **Conclusion**

Jonah is a book for our time – Ireland the welcomes is not to welcoming to refugees, with Direct Provision and the small numbers we accept.