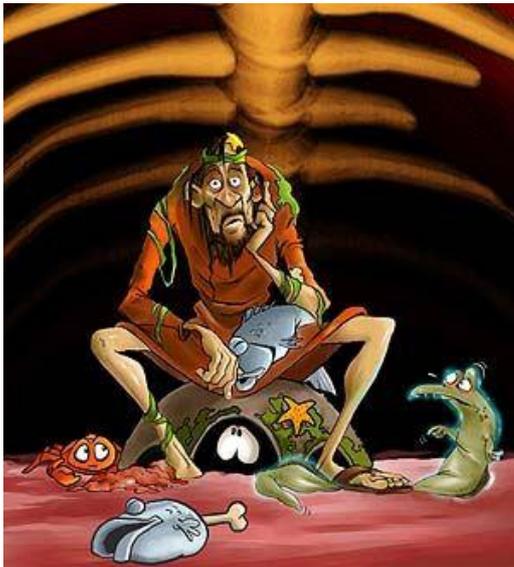


## JONAH AND CHARLIE



The book of Jonah is a mighty small book. Its only four chapters long and even the chapters only take up a few paragraphs. Despite its size, there's a lot that happens in the story, but the one thing that everyone latches onto is the bit about the whale –or the big fish.

A bloke gets swallowed up by a fish - that's about all that most people take from the story.



And of course we wonder whether that could really happen.

Well it turns out there are true stories of people being swallowed by whales before - and surviving.

In the nineteenth century a sailor was swallowed up by a whale and wasn't rescued until over 24 hours later when he made his escape. His hair and his skin had been bleached white by the experience of being inside the whale's belly, but otherwise he was okay.

But spending time wondering about whether Jonah could have survived the whale is a bit of a waste of time.

Because Jonah wasn't really in the whale.

Because the book of Jonah isn't an account of something that happened years ago – it's a story made up to convey a message.

Jonah isn't a history book – it's really a parable.

Jonah was a story (an often humorous tale) told to put across a message.

It's a tale with a punchline. It's a funny story told to make a serious point.

The serious point is all about prejudice.

Let's take a quick look back at what happens in the story.

This man Jonah is asked to go to speak about God to some foreigners, and the thing is that Jonah is prejudiced. He doesn't care about these foreigners and he doesn't really want them to know about God.

The people in question are the Assyrians who are age-old enemies of Israel. And the place concerned is their capital called Nineveh, which is an ancient city; built where now there is a modern one – the city of Mosul – the second biggest city in Iraq. That is where Nineveh was.

To get there, you go east across the desert, so seeing as Jonah doesn't want to go, he runs off the other opposite way and goes west, in a boat sailing to Spain which was (in those days) the furthest west people believed it was possible to go.

This cartoon shows it like it was.



So he runs off, but he ends up in the centre of a fierce storm and he gets thrown into the sea and swallowed by a big fish. After a couple of

days in the fish he is vomited out onto dry land, and he feels pretty lucky to be alive.

So he decides he better do what God wants and so he goes to this great city called Nineveh.

When he gets there the storyteller says it take three days to walk from one end of the town to the other. (He must have been walking pretty slowly!)

And what about the message – the storyteller says that God wants to destroy the whole city unless they turn to God? Simple as that.

They are going to be destroyed.

That's yet another part of this tale that make you know it's a story. God doesn't really act like that. God doesn't go about destroying cities.

Jonah preaches his sermon which in his language would consist of 5 words.

5 words but what an amazing effect !

When they hear this message from Jonah, all the people decide to wise up and act on the message and sort themselves out. Even the animals get to wear sackcloth! The people and the animals get dressed up in sackcloth to show they are serious about turning from their sin.

(Yet another bit of humour in the tale!)

So they turn away from evil ways and they get ready to worship God. And God decides to forgive them after all.

So in the end Jonah's preaching really works and everybody is happy. It all worked out well in the end.

Or has it ?

Everybody's happy ? Actually, no.

There is one person who isn't happy. And that man is Jonah.

You think he would be well pleased with such an effective message – but Jonah is angry.

You see, he doesn't **want** people to listen to him.

He doesn't want these people to turn to God and believe in God – because he thinks they are not good enough.

So Jonah goes off in a sulk.

And then we have this crazy end to the tale about a plant that magically grows up overnight and gives Jonah shade. Jonah is totally impressed with this small tree that has suddenly appeared, but when he wakes up in the morning the tree has withered away. And Jonah is left without his shade against the sun. So he goes into an even deeper sulk and moans away about poor him and the poor plant.

And at the very end of the story God says to Jonah basically:  
*“Are you daft? Are you nuts? A wee plant died and you are all upset about it, yet you couldn’t care less about all the ordinary human beings that might have been killed in this city! There is something far wrong with you Jonah if you think a plant is worth more than all that human life!”*

And that is how the book of Jonah ends.

It is a very unusual story.

It is a very strange story.

It is a very funny story.

And you might want to ask, what does a story like that have do with us ?

As I said a moment ago, it’s a warning against prejudice.

Jonah is a totally prejudiced man. He doesn’t want “these people” forgiven. He actually wants them destroyed. He wants them wiped out.

Now maybe he isn’t like that with most of the rest of the world. Maybe he’s great with his wife and family and remembers to pat his cat on the head. Maybe he’s okay with his own fellow countrymen and women. In fact, maybe he’s pretty tolerant of all other people around the world.

Who knows?....

But he’s got a blind spot.

He’s got at least one group of people that for him are beyond the pale. And even if these people change their ways he doesn’t want them to be forgiven and to receive mercy.

And so Jonah stands for all of us, because we all have our blind spots and prejudices. This isn't a thing of the past. And the message of the book is a challenge to you and me to recognise our prejudices for what they are.

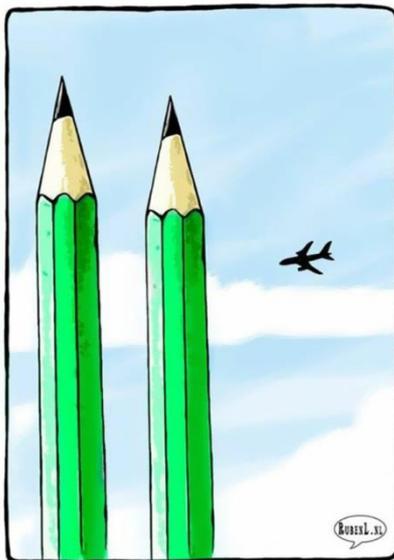
I guess until a couple of weeks ago many people in our country would have struggled to know much about the French magazine, Charlie Hebdo.

But the recent atrocities there are connected with religious and anti-religious fervour.

Charlie Hebdo is well known for its mocking of organised religion and Islam in particular. Over the years there have been many court cases, sackings and scandals associated with it, as the magazine tried to stretch the boundaries of free speech to its maximum. I guess there is always going to be a fine line between free speech and hate speech.

But none of that comes remotely close to justifying what happened. The horrific massacre carried out there was an act of pure evil. And the gunmen who committed the murders were Muslims who shouted "Allahu Akbar" (meaning God is great) as they carried out the attacks.

As you might predict, a lot of the responses have come in the form of cartoons.



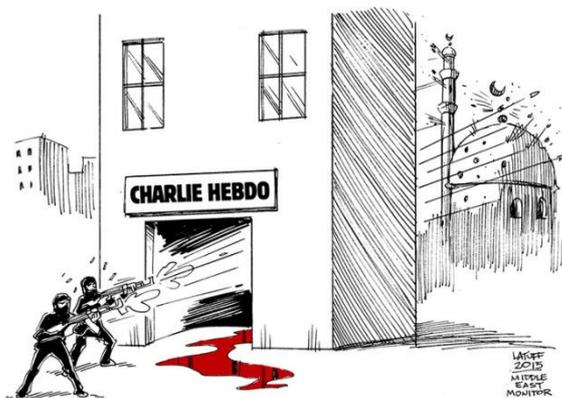
This is the picture that has perhaps been most circulated. The allusion to the twin towers on this picture highlights the severity and impact of the attack.



This cartoon highlights the disproportionate nature of the violence. It is nothing short of barbarism to shoot dead people who are armed only with pens.



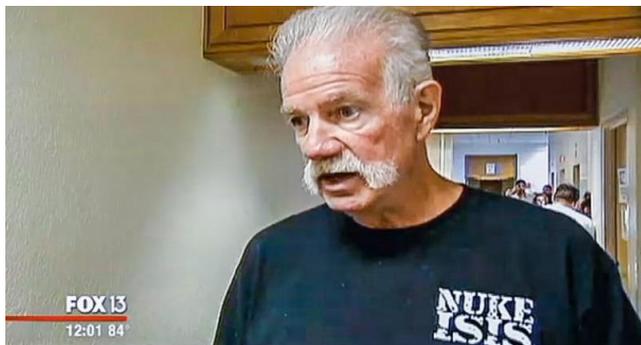
This picture highlights the fact that acts of terrorism only escalate the problem.



And this picture cleverly points out another truth. The actions of these terrorists in the name of Islam only stokes up more future trouble for mosques and Muslims around the world. In other words, killing is counter-productive and escalates the problem.

So right here we've got a current example of extreme religious prejudice.

And it might be easy for us to highlight and to slag off Islam, when we are not Muslims. But hatred and prejudice can be seen in those claiming to be Christian too.



Terry Jones – a few years back he hit the news as the Koran burning pastor. Some churches (like our own) will run a bar-b-q from time to time outside the church building. He actually ran an event outside his building called “Burn a Koran Day”.



Westboro Baptist Church is a tiny congregation in America known for their extreme hatred of Judaism, Islam, gays, Democrats, and just about anyone that doesn't go to their church.



What I like about this picture is that the signs have Bible texts under them making out these words are quotes, when in fact the Bible doesn't say any of these things...

These people are crazy – but they are not 'harmless' crazy, they are not 'laugh out loud' crazy. They are dangerously (and hugely offensively) crazy.

They preach hate in the name of the God of love.

They preach war in the name of Jesus, the prince of peace.

They twist goodness into evil.

You can't judge the whole of Islam or Christianity by nutcases who claim to do things in their name.

But religious prejudice is alive and well.

Of course, religion hasn't cornered the market. There is plenty of non-religious prejudice out there too.



An atheist like Richard Dawkins, for example, who blames religion for the prejudice, hate and most of the ills in the world, is himself

guilty of hate speech and prejudice against people of faith, suggesting that all people who believe in God are 'inferior' people and should not be treated equally. Representatives of Christianity should not be allowed to appear on TV. A journalist who is Muslim\* should not be employed by any respectable newspaper on the grounds of having a religious faith.

(\* Dawkins on Medhi Hasan by Owen Jones Independent 17/7/13)

Formerly best known as a scientist, and a good one at that, Dawkins is now largely engaged (and consumed) in a bitter personal crusade against all religious faith.

According to Dawkins, anyone who claims to believe in God should not be respected and treated like a normal human being.

And now there are atheists who are speaking out against him and distancing themselves from his intolerant ideas.

Whether we are religious, agnostic or atheist, prejudice is everywhere.

There is a war on that we *should* get involved in.

It's not a war between east and west.

It's not a war against Islam.

It's not a war against religion.

It's not a war against atheism.

It's a war against bigotry and intolerance and fundamentalism.

It's the struggle for all of us to live in a world where can we respect our neighbours even when we don't have the same view, where we choose to live together even with people with whom we disagree, where we strive to live in peace and accept one another despite our differences.

This wee story of Jonah written so long ago is underlining the need for human beings to tackle prejudice. And it's a message we still need to hear.

And as I close, let me finish by saying this.

Jonah the book is also underlining what is the greatest and the best news of all – Gods love is for all people.

The message that God wants us to hear is that all people matter – that God’s love and concern extends to everyone, and no matter who we are, or where we are, or what we’ve done we are cared for by the God who gave us life.

The God who accepts us despite our faults and shortcomings (and way beyond our deserving) challenges us to show care and acceptance to those who live around us – especially to those who are different.

Jonah 3:1-5,10

January 25 2015