

Patience

The Pearl Poet

a Middle English alliterative verse exploration of a religious theme

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This poem has been translated and retold from: J J Anderson (Ed), 1976, reprinted with revised bibliography 2005. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Parience*. Orion Publishing Group. The poem is found in a single copy in British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x.

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Patience

The Pearl Poet
late fourteenth century

Pacience is a poynt thagh hit displese ofte · when hevy herttes ben hurt wyth hethyng other elles · suffraunce may aswagen hem and the swelme lethe · for ho quelles uche a qued and quenches malyce – Patience is a virtue and a defence, although it is often hard to appreciate this when one is bullied and abused; but patience soothes and alleviates every hurt and quenches hostility, and those who can cope patiently with the wrongs done against them will find good fortune. For the hot-headed, though, the more they struggle the deeper they sink into the mire! So it is better to absorb the blow than to retaliate violently against it, however much I may hate to do so.

I heard at a High Mass one holy day how Jesus had taught his disciples eight virtues, eight blessed virtues, each with its own merit and reward. Blessed are those who care nothing for worldly wealth, he taught, for they shall be given the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek and retiring, for they shall possess this world and get to do with it as they want. Blessed are they who bitterly regret their sins, for they shall find comfort. Blessed are those who hunger after justice, for they shall be filled with goodness. Blessed are those who have pity on others, for mercy shall be their reward. And they are blessed who have no blemish in their souls, for they shall see their Saviour with their own eyes. They are blessed also who do not use violence, for they will be called the children of God. And blessed are those who are in command of themselves, for they, also, shall achieve heaven. These are the eight blessings that we have been promised, if we learn to love these eight ladies: Dame

Poverty, Dame Pity, Dame Penance the third, Dame Meekness, Dame Mercy and merry Dame Clean-ness, and then Dame Peace and Dame Patience. He is blessed who has one of these virtues; but to have all of them is better still!

And since I am threatened by this virtue that is called poverty, I shall draw upon patience as well and have a merry time with both these sweet ladies! With both Dame Poverty and Dame Patience. For in the text, these two are grouped together, both cast into a sin-



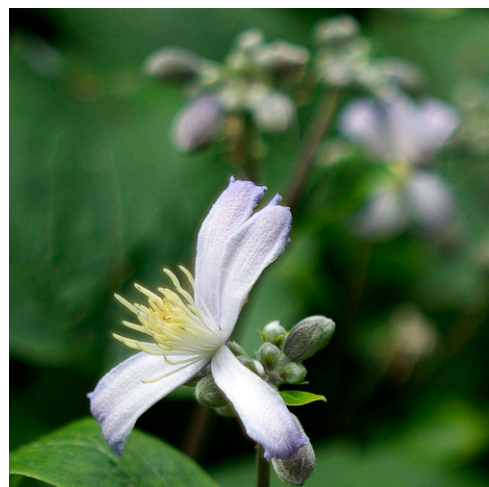
Patience is a religious poem that retells the Old Testament story of Jonah who was swallowed by a whale. It is likely to have been written by the same Cheshire-born poet who composed Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Until the discovery of Hannah's scribal work, both these poems were found in only one surviving manuscript, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x. dating to the very early-fifteenth century. Along with Pearl and Cleanness, which are also found in this manuscript, these poems were composed in the late-fourteenth century by a poet whose identity remains unknown.

gle shape, the first and the last, and by their skilful benefices receive a single reward, that of heaven. And also, in my opinion, they share the same nature, for where poverty puts in an appearance she may not be cast off but will stay for as long as she likes, whether you like it or not! And where poverty oppresses a man, although he may hate to admit it, patience is the only way of coping. Thus poverty and patience are playmates through necessity. And since I am placed with both of them together, I will have to embrace them both, for it is better to make the best of it and be complementary about these two virtues, than to fight them and get angry and only make matters worse. If I have a destiny that is being played out, how will it help me to struggle against you or be defiant? If my liege lord orders me on pain of death to take myself to Rome on his behalf, what shall I gain from complaints and ill-feeling but worse harms still? If he lets me refuse and suffers my insolence, I will have threats and censure. And if I bow to his bidding, my reward will be a friendly slap on the back? Didn't Jonah in Judea suffer a similar joke once? In trying to seek safety he found precisely the opposite! Will you linger for a little while and listen?—for I will tell you a tale that can be found in Holy Writ.

It happened once in the region of Judea that Jonah was summoned to be a prophet to the Gentiles. God's voice came to him: 'Arise at once,' God said. 'Go quickly to Nineveh and when you are there, spread all around the city the words that I shall put into your heart to say. For they are all so criminal, these miscreants who live in that city, and their corruption is so great that I can tolerate them no longer; I will exact my revenge upon their filth and their poison without any more delay. Now carry these words swiftly to them and deliver this message.'

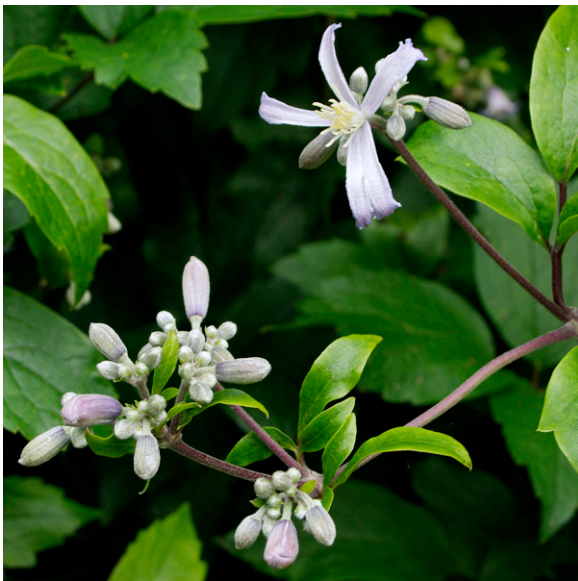
When the voice had ceased, Jonah did not like the words he had heard, he was very upset, raged angrily and vowed defiance: 'If I bow to his will,' he thought, 'and carry this message to all these people, I will get thrown into a jail in Nineveh for it and then my troubles will have begun! He tells me that these people are despicable. So I come to them with this news, they quickly seize me, put me into a cell, fasten me into some stocks, shackle me painfully and gouge out my eyes. This is a curious message to give a man to shout out in the midst of enemies and perverted blasphemers; unless, through some misdemeanor that I have committed, my gracious God wishes me to die.'

'No, I shall try to avoid this at all costs,' resolved Jonah. 'I will go somewhere else where God will not find me. I shall travel to Tarshish and stay there for a while. He will soon forget all about it and leave me alone.'



So Jonah quickly made his way to the port of Jaffa, angrily muttering all the while that he would suffer none of those tortures, although the Father who had made him seemed to want this. 'Our Father sits on his throne on high in shining glory and worries little

that I might be captured in Nineveh, stripped naked, nailed to a cross and have laughter and abuse hurled at me,' thought Jonah. So he went to Jaffa to seek passage on a ship, found a good vessel that was nearly ready to embark, spoke with the mariners and paid them what they asked to take him to Tarshish as quickly as they could. He climbed aboard as they prepared their ropes, secured the sail, fastened hawsers; then they heaved at the windlass, weighed the anchor, fastened a retaining rope to the spar, pulled at the guide-ropes and a great sail fell. Then they leaned on the steering-oar, the ship turned, the wind filled the sail and a strong breeze on their backs made it swell and billow and urged this sweet ship swiftly away from the harbour. Never had a Jew been more joyful! Jonah thought he had courageously escaped the perils that God had put in his path; for



he knew for certain that the person who had made the Earth and all the plants and animals that lived upon it had no power to trouble anyone on the ocean!

The foolish idiot. By trying to escape, he places himself in much greater danger.

It was a daft idea that Jonah formed in his mind, that God would not be able to see him when he escaped from Judea. God's gaze is wide enough and Jonah ought to have known this, since he had often read the words of the noble King David who has written in one of the psalms: 'Oh foolish folk, can you not try

to understand sometimes, even though you are stupid? Do you think that he cannot hear, who made every ear? Is he blind, who created every eye?'

But a senile old man fears no danger, and Jonah is far out to sea now, happily bound for Tarshish.

I believe, however, that he will soon be overtaken by events. His aim has been woefully short. For the Father of intelligence who knows every single thing that there is to know, who waits and watches, can arrange for the unexpected to happen. And now he called upon some of those things that he himself had created. They awoke in agitation at his angry voice: 'Eurus and Aquilo, easterly wind and northeasterly wind, blow at my command upon this blue water!' commanded God.

In no time at all they obeyed his instructions, so eager were they to carry them out. Out of the northeast the noise began. Two gales started to blow together across the blue waters. Clouds gathered with red bases and the sea rose dreadfully; it was terrifying to hear the winds as they wrestled over the water. The waves soon rose to a terrifying height, then fell madly down into the abyss, so wildly that there was no safety to be found on the sea-bottom for any fishes! Where the wind and the sea and the ship all met together, it was a joyless snare that Jonah found himself in. The vessel rolled around on the moun-

tainous sea, the waves struck from behind and shattered the steering gear, then it surged again, overwhelming the helmsman and engulfing the stern. Ropes snapped and the mast broke, the sail fell into the sea and the ship began to take in cold seawater in copious amounts! Then cries arose. Yet they had the presence of mind to try to lighten their load, to cut all the cords that held down the cargo and throw the stuff overboard. Many men leapt to bale out the water and to throw everything over the side, to scoop out the dreadful sea when all they wanted to do was escape from it themselves; for however desperate a man's plight, his life is dear to him.

So they busied themselves throwing out packages, their bags and their feather beds and their fancy clothes, their chests, their trunks and their casks, and all to lighten their vessel in the hope that this might help. But the noise of the wind grew ever greater and the angry violence of the waves became ever more fearsome. And at last, the exhausted mariners could think of no other remedy but for each man to call upon his god, the one that he thought most likely to help them in their extremity. Some cried to the giant Vernagu and pledged him their solemn vows, some prayed to Diana and others to Neptune, some to Muhammad or to the moon or to the sun. Each man prayed to the god that he worshipped and had given his heart to.

Then the wisest tried to give counsel, although he was near to despair: 'I think we have on board some scoundrel, some lawless wretch who has defied his god and sought safety here. Look! We all suffer for his sake and will die for his sins! I suggest that we give every man the choice of some straws and if any man pulls the shortest more than once, we should throw him overboard. And when the guilty man has gone, can we not hope that the god who rules these storm clouds will have pity on the rest of us?'

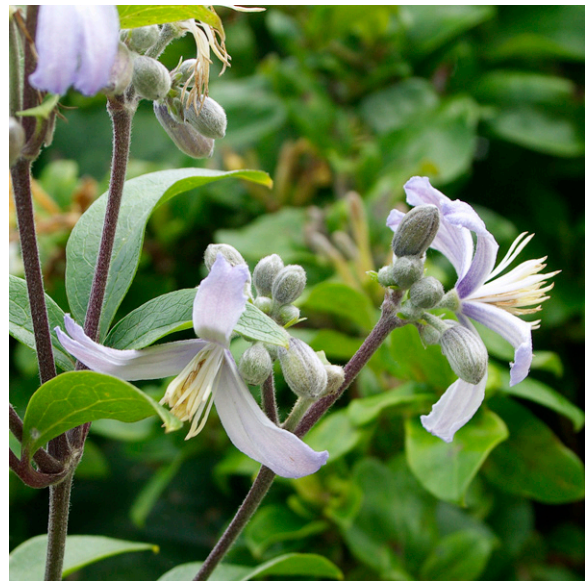
This was quickly agreed to and everybody assembled, hurrying out of every refuge on the ship to receive their lots. A helmsman quickly went down through a hatch to see if there were any men left below, but he found no one except for Jonah the Jew who lay asleep in a corner. He had sought refuge from the noise of the storm and was lying on a plank at the bottom of the ship, trying to hide from the terror above and wedged into a corner where he had fallen asleep and was snoring. The helmsman kicked him with his foot and urged him to get up: 'May Ragnel in his shackles stir you from your dreams!' he cried. The man seized Jonah by the shirt and hauled him unceremoniously up onto the deck, then asked him very roughly what reason he had to be asleep when there was such dire peril to be contended with.

Soon all the lots were distributed. Each man got what fell to him, and always the bad one fell to Jonah. Then they all shouted at him asking: 'What the devil have you done, you damned fool? What had you hoped to find at sea, you deceiving wretch, that your evil crimes should drown us all? Have you, man, no lord or god to call upon, that you just fall asleep when death beckons us all? Where do you come from? What are you doing here? Where are you bound for? What is the reason for your journey? Lo! Your fate is now sealed for all your evil deeds! Sing the praises of your god before you slip into the sea!'

‘I am a Hebrew,’ replied Jonah. ‘I was born in Israel. I worship he who made all things, the Earth and the heavens, the wind and the stars and all that the Earth contains, alone, at a single command. All this distress is being suffered on my account, for I have angered my God and am found guilty. Therefore take me to the boarding-plank and throw me overboard; you will find no relief from this storm until you do so, I know this for a fact.’

When Jonah had convinced them all that he was fleeing from God, they were terrified. They left Jonah where he was and took to the oars in desperation. These noble mariners worked quickly at the long oars, since their sail was gone; they heaved and pulled to try to save themselves. But it was useless. Their oars broke in the seething water and they were left holding useless stumps. There was nothing left to do but what Jonah himself had judged that his God wanted, to throw him into the sea. But first they prayed to the Prince whom prophets serve that it might not be a guiltless man whom they were about to kill, although the man was his. Then quickly, they seized Jonah by the shoulders and the feet and heaved him overboard into the raging sea.

As soon as Jonah had been cast overboard, the wind died down and the sea began slowly to calm. Then, although their gear had all been smashed and was floating in the water, a swift current gathered them up and looked first of all to be carrying them out to sea, but then another strong current captured them and brought them quickly and safely to land.



There were praises indeed sung to the merciful God of Moses when these mariners disembarked onto the beach. A sacrifice was prepared and solemn vows made to the effect that they now believed that he alone was God, and no other. But although they are now happy and laughing, Jonah is still in deep trouble. He has not yet been injured but his life hangs in the balance, and when we learn what has happened to him after being thrown into the raging sea, we should find it hard to believe were it not written in the Bible. For although Jonah looked destined to drown when he was shoved off that splintered ship, a huge whale surged out of the waves near to the vessel, forced to the surface by the storm, and when it saw the man being thrown into the water it swam swiftly towards him with its great mouth open. Men still held Jonah by the feet as the whale gathered him up and swallowed him without a touch of any tooth. Then the whale dived quickly down to the sea-bottom where there were many ridges of jagged rocks and lonely spits of sand. Jonah was petrified as he lay inside the whale, and little wonder, for has not the High King of Heaven through his mighty hand cast Jonah into the guts of this dreadful beast? Is there any possibility at all that he might survive this ordeal, if the laws of nature

are to be properly respected?

But Jonah was kept alive by God, although he held no hope for himself in the whale's stomach as it glided through the deep and the dark waters. Lord, cold is his comfort and his worries are great! For he is still conscious and aware of what is happening. He knows that he has gone from the ship into the water and been taken by a whale straight down its throat, like a speck of dust through the door of a great cathedral, so huge was its mouth.

Jonah was carried head first through muck and filth, forced through intestines that were wide enough for him to be sucked head-over-heels as he was drawn along until he came to a chamber as large as a hall. And there he found his footing and took his bearings. Jonah stood up in vomit and filth that stank like the devil: it felt like being in hell, but here he made his home and at last found safety. He moved cautiously and searched about for the best shelter he could find, and in every nook of the innards, every organ and bowel that he came across, he could find no relief from the stench and the slime. But God is always a friend! At last Jonah found a place to rest and he cried to God: 'Prince, have pity on your prophet! Although I am foolish and disloyal, please stop this vengeance and display your virtue of mercy. Although I am guilty of deceit – which is the worse failing for a prophet to possess – you are God and all things are yours, so have mercy upon your man and upon his misdeeds and prove yourself to be an all-seeing Lord.'



With this, Jonah found a corner that was not too rank or nauseating and wedged himself into it. And there he remained, comfortable except for the darkness, just as he had been when he lay asleep in the ship's hold. So in an intestine of this beast he lay alive for three days and three nights, turning all his thoughts to God, musing upon his strength and his mercy; for in extreme danger now he can think on him, when safe on the land he could not.

The whale rolled and surged through deep and desolate waters, past underwater crags and through turbulent currents, trying desperately to dislodge this foreign object he had ingested; although Jonah is so small in comparison that it is to be wondered that he caused the whale any discomfort at all. But as Jonah voyaged inside this creature he was rolled and buffeted and turned upside down as the whale writhed with indigestion and beat itself with its fins; and Jonah quickly offered up another prayer: 'Lord, I called to you in my distress and you heard me from the womb of hell! I cried, and you heard my feeble voice. You plunged me into the depths of the sea, the arms of your currents enclosed around me, all the streams of your depths and bottomless deeps flooded over me and yet I cried these words to you as I languished on the sea-bottom:

"Shunned as I am from your benevolent gaze, cast out of your sight, frightened as I am,

I know that I will one day step again onto the floor of your temple and be under your guidance once more.”

‘A surge buffets me, I am enclosed by water, confined in an abyss. I have fallen to the deepest root of every mountain, the barrier of every beach holds me at bay, so that I may reach no land. If you alone hold my destiny, will you cast aside justice and relieve me, Lord, through the strength of your mercy, in which faith is rewarded? For when fear gripped my heart, then I remembered my powerful Lord, imploring him that out of pity he might hear his prophet, and that into his holy house my prayer might enter. I have wrestled with your commands for many a long day, but now I know for certain that those foolish men who trust in vanity and vain things deny themselves your mercy for the sake of nothing – for things that are in comparison, nothing. So I swear this, and I promise to keep to it, that I will devoutly perform a sacrifice if you will save me, and offer you a splendid gift for my deliverance, and do whatever you ask of me now, on this you have my word.’

At once, our Father told the whale to spit Jonah out onto the dry land as quickly as he could. The creature did as he was told. He found a beach and there he sicked Jonah up, as God had commanded. Jonah waded towards the shore in rags that were soaked in filth and vomit, like a man who is washing his clothes as he wears them. And the shore he was making for lay in the very land that he had refused to travel to. A wind sprang up and carried God’s stern voice to Jonah:

‘Are you still intent upon avoiding your journey to Nineveh, by whatever means it takes?’

‘I will go,’ cried Jonah, ‘with your grace. I shall do as you wish.’



‘Then rise up! Prepare to preach. Look around you. See that my words are in your heart, and then release them with venom!’

Jonah quickly prepared himself as best he could and walked all night towards Nineveh. It was a broad city and hugely extensive; to cross from one side to the other was three days’ journey. But Jonah travelled joyfully all the following day without saying a word to anybody that he met. Then he rang his message out so clearly that all could hear and understand him.

‘Forty days will pass, then Nineveh will be destroyed! This city will crumble into rubble and you will all be swallowed into the ground, consumed into the black earth. Every living thing in this city will shortly die!’

This prophesy spread through the city like wildfire, to young and old alike, and when people heard it, the colour drained from their faces, they stopped what they were doing and their hearts froze.

‘The vengeance of God is about to destroy this place!’ Jonah cried in prophesy.

The people began to wail and lament quietly to themselves, their hearts stunned for fear of God. They quickly seized rough hair shirts which scratched and bit at their skin and wore these against their bare flesh, on their backs and against their naked sides. They dropped ashes onto their heads and plaintively enquired of God if this penance was pleasing to he who was obviously so angry with their crimes? And all the time Jonah continued to prophesy doom, until the king heard it. He leapt up at once and ran from his throne, tearing the costly garments from his body until his back was naked, and threw himself into a heap of ashes. He urgently called for a hair shirt and quickly put it on, bound a sack over it and sighed miserably to himself, lying dazed in the dust with the tears running down his face, weeping for his sins. Then he called to his sergeants-at-arms:

‘Do the same as I’m doing, as quickly as you can! And give out a decree, issued by myself, that every living thing within this city, men and beasts, women, children, every prince, every priest and every temple worker must begin an immediate fast, in order to atone for their misdeeds. Pull babies from their mother’s breasts, however much they scream and cry! Prevent cattle and sheep from tearing the grass with their teeth! Let no ox eat any hay and give no water to any horse. All the people shall cry out, starving, wailing with all the strength that they might still be able to muster, and the sound of their distress will rise to he who may then show mercy upon us all. For who knows but this might do us some good in the noble eyes of he who lives on high. His might is so great, although he is displeased with us, that in his mild gentleness he might find the grace to have mercy upon us. And if we abandon the folly of our hateful sins and quietly tread the path that he favours, his mad anger will abate and he will forgive us our guilt, if we believe in him and call him God.’

Then everyone embraced God’s laws and abandoned their sins; they did as their king commanded and performed all the penance. And God forgave them and, although he had indicated otherwise, he withheld his vengeance.

But then Jonah was livid! In a storm of anger he cried out to the Lord: ‘I ask you, Sir, judge for yourself! Wasn’t this exactly what I said would happen! When your voice came to me in Judea, when you commanded me to travel to this city to warn them of your anger, I knew that my words would be shown to be false! I know your capacity for gentility, your remarkable patience, your kindness and your willingness to forgive, your keenness to tolerate disobedience, your slowness to anger and your hesitation to take revenge. Always your mercy is generous, however grievous the sin. I knew, when I considered what I had to say to menace all these unpleasant people who live in this city, that with a prayer and a penance they would find themselves let off. So I decided to flee to Tarshish instead. Lord, kill me now! My life has lasted too long! Deal me my death-blow and let me die. I would rather burn on a pyre than pander to your will any more, with words that are bound to make me out to be a liar.’

The voice of God then roared into his ear: ‘Listen, you imbecile! Is it right to scream and shout so arrogantly against the things that your God has done, or has asked you to do?’

Jonah went off, muttering angrily to himself. He made his way to the east side of the city and there he settled comfortably on a piece of rough ground, intending to wait and see what happened next. And here he built for himself a little shelter, the best that he could, out of dry grass and ferns and a few other plants that were growing round about; for it was a wild area of near-desert with no trees anywhere to provide any shade. Jonah sheltered under his little makeshift hut with his back to the sun, and when night fell he stretched out onto the ground beneath it and slept soundly. And while Jonah slept, God caused a beautiful climbing plant like a honeysuckle to grow, the fairest a man has ever seen. And when God later sent the dawn to brighten the sky, Jonah awakened beneath this honeysuckle and looked up into a canopy of green leaves quivering above him. Never before had any man seen such a beautifully-constructed shelter of leaves. It was broad at the base and branched out at the top, entwining at the apex as though it was a house, with an entrance on the north side and nowhere else, for all the world like a den in a thicket, shaded and cool. Jonah looked at the beautiful green leaves that waved about in the breeze above his head and noticed how they sent cool air currents towards him; and the bright sun shone mercilessly down over everything else but not a single ray fell upon this man in his den. Jonah was delighted with his beautiful home; he lay loitering within it, looking towards Nineveh, so happy with his honeysuckle that he rolled about on the ground beneath it and decided not to eat any food that day – the devil have it! – he determined. And he laughed whenever he gazed around at his den and found himself wishing that he was beneath this honeysuckle in his own country, high up on mount Ephraim or on mount Hermon perhaps. ‘I’ve never had a lovelier home!’ he thought to himself, contentedly.

When night began to fall, Jonah lay beneath a pile of leaves and was soon asleep; and while he lay slumbering, God caused a worm to invade the roots of the honeysuckle. By the time it was morning and Jonah was awake again, the plant had wilted completely. Then God commanded the dry, westerly wind to blow gently and warmly so that no cloud should come into the sky to obscure the scorching sun, which he commanded to expand to its fullest breadth, and burn like a flame!

Jonah awoke from his wandering dreams, glanced up at his honeysuckle and saw that it had withered and died. The leaves had all shrivelled and wasted, for the morning sun had already finished them off. Then the heat of the day grew greater, the sun burned down, a warm breeze parched all the vegetation and Jonah, with nowhere at all to find shelter from the dreadful heat, wept for sorrow at the loss of his honeysuckle. In a blind rage he cried out to God:

‘Ah! Maker of all men! How does it help your authority to persecute me, your own prophet? You fling in my direction every harm you can think of. I found comfort and now you snatch it away from me again! The honeysuckle shading my head was excellent. But now I see that you are determined to take everything from me. So why don’t you

kill me? I have lived too long!’

‘Is it appropriate, Jonah, to scream and shout so much for the sake of a honeysuckle?’ replied God. ‘Why are you angry over such a little thing?’

‘It is not little!’ cried Jonah. ‘It is all about justice. I wish I was gone from this world, wrapped in soil.’

‘Then reflect upon this, since you are so troubled and disturbed,’ said God. ‘Why should I not go out of my way to help the things I have made myself? You are in a temper because of your honeysuckle, but you never gave it any attention, not for a single hour. It was there in a moment, and gone the next. Yet you take this so badly that you want to destroy yourself over it! So why do you blame me if I choose to help those whom I have made by taking pity upon the ignorant and the misled, when they cry out to me for their sins? For I formed them in the beginning, by myself, alone, and I have watched over them for a long time and held them in my care.

‘Were I to lose all this work by destroying this city, when it has already repented, I would be hard-hearted indeed if such misery did not affect me: the cries of sinful men who are now showing such contrition, innocents such as little babies who have never caused any harm to anybody and handicapped women who cannot tell their left hands from their right, nor a stair from a handrail even. And there are countless dumb animals within the city as well, who are incapable of sin. Why should I be angry with them, when men now turn to me and recognise me as their Lord and believe what I tell them? Were I as impetuous as you, then great harm would be done. Were I as incapable of seeing things out as you are, few indeed might survive! But I could never behave so badly and still be held to be good. Malice cannot be maintained without it being tempered by mercy. So don’t be so angry, good Jonah, and go on your way. Be patient and unswerving in pain and in joy, for he who is too quick to tear his clothes in frustration, must endure the discomfort of having to sit and sew them all together again!’

Therefore, when poverty oppresses me, it is right that I should endure it with calm and with patience, and the existence of sorrow and pain makes it obvious that patience is a virtue and a defence, although this is often hard to accept.

Amen.