

11.10.2017 St John with St Mark, Bury
Jonah 4. Luke 11:1-4.

The story of Jonah, which we are all familiar with, has our hero fleeing from the commands of God, taking ship and being caught up in a storm. Jonah volunteers to be thrown over board and is swallowed by a great fish, otherwise, a whale. The whale vomits him up onto dry land and Jonah finally does as God wants him to do and that is go to Nineveh and tell the people to repent of their sins. He goes to Nineveh, a mighty city, taking three days to cross it. He goes into the city for a day, says "Repent" and goes back out of the city to see what will happen. To his amazement the king and people repent of their sins and God repents from destroying them. As he watches a plant grows up to give him shade. Then the plant dies and Jonah complains. He has not yet truly learnt that God is behind the good and the bad alike. Now critically, Jonah is a Jew going to summon an Assyrian town to repent. A Jew is going to the Gentiles.

Jonah's story comes as a response to a very stressed situation. The people of Israel have been released from their exile in Babylon and have returned to Palestine. There they have found that the remaining Israelites who remained in Palestine during the exile have tended to marry Gentiles. They have formed mixed marriages. Stories are then told that the mixed marriages will be broken and Jew will marry Jew alone. There will be racial purity. These stories are found in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra. In the time of apartheid South Africa the Dutch Reformed Church used Nehemiah and Ezra to justify apartheid and racial purity.

Jonah, where a Jew goes to a Gentile, deliberately breaks with racial purity and sees God operating even over Gentile countries, for God is the God of all people. Indeed, God is the God of all things, even the plants dying at the action of a burrowing worm.

There are several points to be made in the conjunction of Nehemiah and Ezra, and Jonah. The first is that the Bible contains texts we nowadays find difficult and wish to reinterpret. The way that Nehemiah and Ezra are nowadays used by the western Church, including the Church of England, is to use the stories of Nehemiah and Ezra as stories of courageous endurance and witness in times of trial. We do not read out the stories of the breaking of the mixed marriages. We need to be courageous in what we do read and read even difficult texts.

Secondly, we need to hear the conflict between Nehemiah and Ezra and Jonah and recognize that there is conflict even amongst the biblical texts. We should be able to have divergent voices and handle conflict with tact, discretion, and faithfulness to one's view.

Thirdly, in a time when the idea of political correctness is seemed to be wrong, we need to hear the story of Jonah and be pleased that God works with Gentile and Jew together. It may be politically correct, but that does not make the story wrong.

Finally, I don't know about you, but whales swallowing men seems a bit far-fetched. What we are dealing with in Jonah is not a historical event, but rather a lively piece of argument. We need to also hear Nehemiah and Ezra not as history books but as story books. No-one actually knows if the mixed marriages were dissolved. Again, we are dealing with stories, not events. We need to develop a near able to hear stories as being a good form of communication. This becomes even more important when dealing with the New Testament. This will give us the space to tell our own stories as being part of the graciousness of the God whose mercies never end. Amen.