

3rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Year B

We hardly need reminding that prejudices between people of various ethnic backgrounds is still very much alive in our world. The sad thing is that unless we are personally affected we do tend to take that as a given and shrug it off as inevitable. Some may be surprised to find that the Bible addresses the issue in a number of places, and one of them may be found in today's first reading from the Book of Jonah.

Most people know very little about Jonah except that, according to the story, he fell off a ship into the sea, was swallowed by a whale and after surviving this ordeal for three days, was coughed up onto the shore. But the Book of Jonah is actually a parable that addresses the issue of prejudice against foreigners and foreign nations. It was written to condemn the sin of intolerant nationalism, the arrogance of one nation looking down upon another.

It's a good story, but it's one that speaks to our time and our own experience. It begins with the prophet Jonah receiving orders from God to go to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and preach repentance to the people. Now that was like sending **good** James Hird into **bad** Collingwood. The Assyrians were the traditional enemies of Israel. They had destroyed Samaria a few hundred years previously and had taken the people from the ten northern tribes into exile, where they were never heard from again. Jews therefore were taught to hate Assyrians, and considered them outside the pale of God's mercy.

So what does Jonah do when he hears God's message? He, of course, shares the prejudice of his own people towards Assyrians. Instead of beginning the journey **eastwards** towards that country in obedience to God's word, he hops on board a ship that is traveling **west** – exactly the opposite direction. But a great storm arises and according to their superstitious custom, the sailors throw lots to see who is responsible for the storm. The lot falls on Jonah, and he is eaten by a large fish and, after three days, is thrown up onto the shore. There God tells him a second time to go to Nineveh.... Which is where today's first reading begins.

This time Jonah – who is not **totally** stupid – decides that he had better do what God is asking of him, so he sets out for Nineveh. He preaches to the people as he had been told to do in the first place, threatening them with disaster if they do not change their ways and repent. To his great

surprise, they listen to him. Everyone, from the king to the least citizen and, would you believe, even the animals, repents in sackcloth and ashes. In response, God has pity on them and withdraws his threat of disaster.

But spare a thought for poor old Jonah. He never wanted to do this preaching job in the first place. He would rather die than be remembered as the prophet who brought God's blessing to the Assyrians. But God only responds to Jonah with the question "Why are you angry? Shouldn't I be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot distinguish their right hand from their left, not to mention the many cattle?" It's a great story and it's not difficult to see its application. The author of the Book of Jonah is in fact laughing at the self-satisfied arrogance and narrow prejudices of his fellow Jews towards other nations and tribes – prejudices that are even shared by people in leadership positions, such as Jonah. People who should know better. But it's no laughing matter.

This story – for all its veiled humour – focuses our attention on the fact that God created the world for all its inhabitants to live off and enjoy. National boundaries were not set up by God – they were set up by human beings. Because of these boundaries, people have been cut off from each other, and prejudices have arisen because they don't know or understand one another. As a result, many people look across their national boundaries and see people on the other side as being not quite as valuable as themselves. "We are God's people," they sometimes imagine, "and we live in God's country". We need to pause for a moment and reflect how truly ridiculous this attitude must appear in the eyes of God.

As we read the Scriptures carefully, we may be surprised to discover that it is very often the stranger and the foreigner who are blessed by God, while the actual inhabitants of the land get no blessing. Because strangers and foreigners, because of their vulnerable position, tend to be more aware of their dependence on God, while the inhabitants of the land take God for granted. Jesus himself later on would have an angry confrontation with his fellow-Jews on this very issue. He reminded them that it was a Syrian general – a foreigner – whom the prophet Elisha cured of his leprosy, rather than an Israelite. He also recalled that in the time of the great famine in Israel, the prophet Elijah went to the aid of a foreign widow in Sidon, a country to the north, but not to any of his fellow-Israelites.

Is there a message here for us? I'm **sure** there is. Powerful empires have come and gone for thousands of years. We notice the arrogance of Jonah

in the face of God's message – he thinks **he** knows better than God who should, and should not, be blessed. This story is a caricature of how power and prosperity, and the arrogance that come from them, can blind people from seeing the truth about themselves. It's a caricature of those who pride themselves on being God's people when the gap between rich and poor is growing, and the manufacture and stockpiling of armaments continues to be the world's biggest industry. The Book of Jonah is a story about a people who prided themselves on being God's people – while God preferred to send his prophet to a nation who were their enemies, where he found hearts that *were* willing to change.