

Sermon for Evensong on the First Sunday in Lent, 10th March 2019
Psalm 119:73-88; Jonah 3; Luke 18:9-14 - Turning

Turning is sometimes a bit controversial. ‘The lady is not for turning’ they said about a former Prime Minister. The current Prime Minister is praised for the fact that she ploughs on and does not turn from her desired path. It’s supposed to be a very good thing to be single-minded and steadfast, and not to deviate from your objectives.

But actually, a major theme of Lent is in direct contradiction with this. Lent is, among other things, about repentance, repentance meaning changing your mind, *μετανοια* in Greek. There’s a good example of it in our first reading from Jonah, about the city of Nineveh, the ancient Assyrian city in upper Mesopotamia, located on the outskirts of the present-day Iraqi city of Mosul. On the banks of the River Tigris, Nineveh was at the heart of the earliest human civilisation.

God didn’t like what was going on in Nineveh. He instructed the prophet Jonah to go there and denounce them, tell them the error of their ways. Jonah didn’t want to face them, and decided to run away to sea instead; but the ship got caught in a storm, and the sailors were deciding, by casting lots, whom they should chuck overboard to lighten the ship. Poor old Jonah drew the short straw. They asked him more about himself: where he came from and what he was supposed to be doing.

Jonah told them that he worshipped the one true God, who made both sea and land. He also told them that he was escaping from this god. ‘What shall we do with you,’ they asked, ‘to make the sea go down?’ Because the storm was getting worse and worse. Jonah said, ‘Take me and throw me overboard: and the sea will go down.’ Jonah said that he knew it was his fault that their ship had been hit by this great storm, because he, Jonah, had disobeyed God. Well, they chucked Jonah over the side, and Jonah was swallowed up and saved by being in a whale.

Then he emerged from the whale, came back and had another go. This time he did carry out what God had instructed him to do, and he went to Nineveh to tell them the error of their ways. That’s where we come in and pick up the story. When Jonah had warned them that in forty days their city would fall - impliedly, because of their evil deeds - they changed; they

repented. The king of Nineveh arose from his throne and covered himself in sackcloth and ashes. He spread a decree through Nineveh, telling the population not to eat or drink, but rather to show their penitence and turn from their evil ways.

God saw what they'd done, that they'd turned from their evil ways, and 'God repented of the evil', he changed his mind about it, and he decided not to destroy the city. Changing your mind, here, is a sign of magnanimity, generosity of heart. God is, by definition, omnipotent. He can do anything. He has no need to change his mind. But he did. It wasn't a sign of weakness. And so was the way the King of Nineveh reacted to Jonah's preaching. He didn't dig in his heels and pretend that what they were doing was right. He was big-hearted enough to admit that they were doing wrong, and they needed to change.

Knowing that you're right, and the other fellow is wrong, is all part of this. In the New Testament, Jesus has this telling story about the Pharisee and the publican, the privatised tax-man. Even Margaret Thatcher - of revered memory, of course - never tried to privatise the Inland Revenue: but the ancient Romans did. It was just like Capita or any other other outsourcing people. They incentivised the private tax collectors. You got to keep a percentage of what you collected, so, the more you collected, the more you earned.

Peter Mandelson and New Labour would have been fine with it. They're supposed to have said, 'We're relaxed about people getting filthy rich'. Just imagine. What a great franchise opportunity. No wonder the people hated the 'publicans', the tax collectors. But this publican had an attack of conscience. Although he was working within the rules, he knew it was wrong.

But the respectable bod, the Pharisee, paraded his virtue and charitable giving. He thanked God that he wasn't a sinner like the publican, an extortioner, unjust - and sleeping with other men's wives as well. A thoroughly bad lot. But he, the Pharisee, was just fine. He didn't do any of the bad things that the publican did. But even so, Jesus reckoned that the bad old taxman was the one who was more worthy of salvation. All he said was, 'God be merciful to me a sinner'. Jesus reckoned he would get that mercy.

I think this is a lesson for us today. What do we feel about whether we should let people whom we disagree with, or worse, whom we think are doing something evil, worship with us and be part of our church community? There's an article in this week's Church Times by the Dean of St Paul's, Dr David Ison [See <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/8-march/comment/opinion/the-looking-glass-world-of-the-judgemental>]. It is focused on the question whether LGBT people can be denied Holy Communion, because allegedly they are sinners, the question whether they are 'worthy' to receive. But it could equally be about anyone whose beliefs don't chime with ours. I know that, for example, I disapprove very strongly of UKIP, and what I think it stands for. I think that in many ways UKIP is actually evil. But I know there are people who come to this church who support UKIP. Dr Ison says, in effect, that when we examine our consciences, we are all to some degree 'unworthy'. We are all like the people in Jesus' parable. It would be wrong for me to parade my supposed virtue in contrast with the sins of those whose views I disapprove of. Like the King of Nineveh, I must change my mind, I must repent.

A few years ago I tried to persuade the PCC at Cobham to make St Andrew's an Inclusive Church, capital I and capital C - part of the Inclusive Church network. It would involve not just being inclusive, welcoming all sorts of people: certainly LGBT, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual - or 'intersex', the 'I' in LGBTI, but also telling the outside world, putting a statement of welcome for all, in public, outside on the church notice board.

And not just LGBTI people would be welcome: black people, foreign people, people in scruffy clothes, people who might be homeless dossers, just coming in to be warm. Anyone. If your church belongs to the Inclusive Church network, there's a sign outside to tell people, whoever they are, that they are welcome.

Do you know how I got on with my proposal to St Andrew's PCC? Any ideas? I lost, 19 votes to 2. They said, 'Of course we're inclusive. But we mustn't offend the bigots by making it too obvious'! We mustn't offend the bigots. Really. That's what they said. Now I think that Inclusive Church is right within the ambit of what Jesus was talking about with his

parable of the Pharisee and the tax-man. Even though the tax-man probably wasn't 'worthy', he was welcome - welcome not just in the church, but even in the Kingdom of Heaven.

I really think that our churches should be genuinely open and welcoming, and as Dean Ison says, you can't start to exclude people because they don't measure up to your personal standards, however apparently scriptural those standards might be. I know from talking to people who have felt shy about coming to a church, because they are worried that they are 'different' in some way, that it makes a big difference if the church has a sign outside which confirms publicly that there is a welcome inside for everyone, however different, or even defective, they might appear to some people to be.

For me, one thing that means is learning to welcome even the UKIP people. It means changing my mind: repenting. During this Lent, what do you think you might change your mind about? Are you like the Pharisee, or like the publican? Or are you like the King of Nineveh, even? I hope and pray that you are.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant