

Sermon on Wednesday 24 February 2021 by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: Jonah 3; Luke 11. 29-32

I love the book of Jonah. It is a rattling good yarn, there is humour and in four short chapters there are at least five good theological points. What are they? Answers on a postcard. First correct answer gets a prize.

But the points that Jesus makes about Jonah in Matthew's Gospel, and in today's Gospel, are not among them and would not have occurred to the author.

The reference in Matthew is about the three days and nights Jonah spent in the belly of the fish prefiguring the time Jesus would spend in the tomb.

And in today's Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus refers to Nineveh's repentance when they heard Jonah preaching compared with his own people's disregard for a much greater message.

And Jesus also calls in aid the Queen of the South – not the Scottish football team but the Queen of Sheba – who came a great distance to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, while Jesus' own generation has much greater wisdom on their doorstep but pay no attention.

There was no reason to feel sorry for either Nineveh or Sheba. Sheba dripped with wealth from trade in incense and spices and Nineveh was the heart of the most successful and aggressive military empire of its time.

But neither had much religious insight – they were spiritually deprived and Jonah and Solomon were able to help them.

By contrast, Jesus' hearers were not politically significant and most would not have been at all well off materially. But they did have a thousand-year-old inheritance of scripture, doctrine and liturgy. They were spiritually far better off than Sheba or Nineveh.

Just as those who are wealthy in the world's goods are supposed to be generous - "of those to whom much is given, much is required" - so those with a wealth of spiritual inheritance ought to be more receptive of godly counsel.

Two extra bits...

Jesus himself knew his scripture well and could reasonably have presumed that his hearers were familiar enough with their scriptures to know by heart the tales of Jonah and of the Queen of Sheba but, nevertheless, he still included enough of the background story to make his point clear.

There is an object lesson there for teachers and preachers.

And second..

It is probably true that the visit of the Queen of Sheba was included in the First Book of Kings more to emphasise the glory of Solomon than the spiritual curiosity of the Queen; and it is probably true that Jonah was written as a counterblast to exclusionary doctrines developing among those who had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon rather than to congratulate the people of Nineveh.

But scripture speaks to each generation in new ways. It is a constant spring gushing up for our refreshment.