

Epiphany 5
9/2/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Jonah 3:10-4:11
Psalm 117
Matthew 5:13-20

Jonah and the miracle of the repenting God

In a sentence

God is no weapon in the hands of the people of God but the means by which they will be reconciled to their enemies

Conventional wisdom holds that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Something of this sentiment, and its violation, is at the heart of our reading from Jonah today.

We've just heard of a third striking miracle in the story of Jonah: after the miracle of the fish and the miracle of Nineveh, now the miracle of the vine or 'gourd'.

This third miracle is perhaps the strangest of the three. Jonah has already settled under a shade he has made for himself, waiting to see what will happen to the city. Yet we're told that the vine grows and gives him shade from the heat, even though he's already sitting in the shade. If the fish has a purpose in keeping Jonah alive, the purpose of the vine does *not* seem quite to be to give shade.

The vine's purpose seems more to be that it should *die*, that it should irritate Jonah and so that it should open the way to the final exchange about Jonah's commitment to the vine: 'You are concerned about the bush', God says, 'for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.'

But this doesn't quite work, either: God's account doesn't seem to address the real situation. It is not that Jonah *laboured* which is the problem but that he is now again (despite the booth he built himself) exposed to the sun.

On the face of it, the story seems a little confused. More than that, it also seems overworked. Grumpy Jonah could have been as easily chastised for his angry response to God's forgiving ways without the credibility of the story being further undermined with another whacky miracle.

To find sense in all this, we must see that we do not have here a *mere* miracle, something which pops up and simply must be taken on face value. The appearance of the vine is something beyond mere divine power and does something beyond merely provoking a response. The vine embodies a truth about God, Jonah and the Ninevites of the world.

Let's see how this might be so.

While Jonah gets angry about the vine, what he has really been angry about is God's reconciliation with the Ninevites. We've noted before the extent of the hatred Israel held for Nineveh. It is, then, is 'very displeasing to Jonah' that God 'repents of the evil' (KJV) intended for Nineveh.

But this suggests that what was *pleasing* to Jonah was that Nineveh had it coming from God: my God is the enemy of my enemy. And, if we take the writings of a prophet like Nahum at face value, Jonah was right here: God had a controversy with Assyria.

So the vine fits neatly into the story when it is the both the great comfort and then the great distress of Jonah: when it is the *wrath* of God and then the *mercy* of God, for those whom Jonah hates.

‘You are concerned about the bush’, says God, ‘for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.’ My wrath has risen, and fallen away. But it is *my* wrath; *what business is this of yours?*

And there is the religious shock in the story of Jonah. God asks of Jonah, ‘What of my business is your concern, except you yourself?’ Or, in terms of the conventional wisdom with which we began: ‘What about my friendship with you makes *me* the enemy of *your* enemy?’

The gods of the nations – even the gods of those who imagine they have no gods – are always the enemy of my enemy. This is one of the principal purposes of a god: to defend me, to be the proof or the form of my righteousness in relation to others. My god is the enemy of my enemies simply because they are *my* enemies; God must be against them. I pray to my god in order that she might reduce you, or I invoke a power I believe in – perhaps some purportedly secular political correctness – in order to chastise you.

But in the story of Jonah, and as a recurring theme in the Scriptures, we see a different divinity in action. This One is not – because ours – *thereby* against those *we* are against. This God is never part of an arsenal.

The vine is God’s wrath for Jonah’s enemies. Jonah takes it to be a shield to protect him from the burning heat of God’s passion for those who do not even know their right hand from their left. The vine shields him from the blinding light which is forgiveness for those who ‘know not what they do’. And then God takes that shield away. The withered vine is the epiphany of God’s scorching grace – scorching, that is, for Jonah as he sees his enemies embraced by God.

The grace of God – that God ‘repents’ in this way – is the central problem which the book of Jonah addresses and is the meaning of this final miracle but there is another closely-related problem, what we might call the ‘political’ significance of such a repenting God.

What does life look like when our God is *not* the enemy of our enemies? What should we do if the righteousness in which we would hide will not shield us from our enemies but instead befriends them – makes them sisters, brothers?

We can, of course, trade such a God – such a righteousness – for another. And this where the book of Jonah ends. Though we’ll come back to it for another week or two, we’ve heard the end of the story today, and it is no ‘happily ever after’. The story concludes with an open question. Indeed, it is a request for judgement – *our* judgement on *God*: ‘Should I *not* be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who know not what they do?’

We know what the answer should be: Yes, Lord. The ‘friend we have in Jesus’ must also be the friend of my enemies. To be able to answer in this way would be to become the fourth – untold – miracle of the book of Jonah: the conversion of Jonah himself.

Do we want such a miracle performed, for all the humility and grace it might cost us?

Let us look to grow into the kingdom of heaven through a righteousness which exceeds that of Jonah.

And, in this way, may we become a miracle: a friend to our enemies, our Friend's friends.
