

Is my nation special? Is it different from other nations? These questions arise in today's world. Our own country is trying to work out its future relationship with other European nations. The President of the USA unashamedly puts his own country first, and tells the United Nations General Assembly that other countries should do the same. Nationhood is a key question in the dealings of Israelis and Palestinians. Sometimes nationhood is linked to religious identity, as in the establishment by force of an Islamic State. All others are infidels, and can be destroyed. And far right groups in our own country have asserted they are trying to maintain the Christian identity of our land.

The story of Jonah raises the question of whether we want God to be merciful to everybody. The first half of the story is well known. God commands Jonah to tell the wicked people of Nineveh to mend their ways, or the city will be destroyed. Nineveh was a Gentile city. Jonah doesn't want to do so, and takes a boat to Tarshish, far away. A storm blows up; he allows himself to be thrown overboard. He is swallowed by a great fish and the storm subsides. The fish vomits him onto dry land and God repeats his command. This time Jonah obeys. The Ninevites from the king downwards repent, and that's where today's reading begins. This second half of the story is less well known. Jonah doesn't like the wicked Ninevites being let off. But his attitude is inconsistent. He was disobedient yet has received God's mercy: he was delivered from drowning and being eaten by a fish. Now he wants to deny God's mercy to others. The episode of the bush and the worm only confirms his resentment. He values the bush because it serves a purpose for him, sheltering him from the sun; he does not value the city. Three times in the story he'd rather die than have God spare Nineveh – obsession is scarcely an adequate word for his condition. But God does care for the city: its people and even its animals. Animals play important parts in the story.

The book of Jonah is part of the Old Testament, the scriptures that the Christian Church shares with the Jewish people. Its message that Gentiles come within God's care is a counterbalance to those parts of the Old Testament which suggest that only the Israelites are God's people. In earlier times it was felt that it was Israel's duty to eliminate foreign nations, so that pagan practices should not corrupt Israel's worship and way of life. Jonah's attitude is similar to this; however the book of Jonah suggests that God does not share his strictness.

By Jesus' time, Israel's attitude to other nations and their religions had become a pragmatic co-existence. The faithful Jew was convinced of the rightness of his or her faith, of the nation's

identity as God's chosen people, but had to accept the reality of belonging to a weak occupied state. Jesus told more than one vineyard parable. The vineyard was an established symbol for Israel, used in this way by the prophet Jeremiah and the psalms. Israelites, especially kings and religious leaders, were to cultivate the vineyard. In the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, the landowner stands for God. Those who have worked a full day are naturally angry that they receive no more pay than the latecomers. With echoes of Jonah's attitude, they begrudge generosity to others. Which new entrants into God's people do the late arriving workers stand for?

The most obvious answer is that those who come in at a late stage represent the followers of Jesus, the Christian movement which began amongst the Jewish people, but within a few years began to accept Gentiles as members. By the time S. Matthew wrote his gospel there was rivalry between Jewish and Christian communities.

It is also possible that the parable can be applied directly to the church which was growing rapidly. Every local gathering of Christians would have its established members with their traditions, particularly if they were from a Jewish background. The parable indicates that newcomers to the church are as much children of the kingdom as the older ones – even if it's the older ones who hold pastoral and teaching positions within the church. This has implications for church life today. It doesn't mean that we should throw out all tradition and do things the way we think newcomers want. We'll probably get it wrong, and it's natural that there should be a time of 'growing into' the community that someone has joined. What it does mean is that there should be a focus on communicating in ways that newcomers will understand, a willingness to listen to them, and to involve them in the life of the church.

It's so easy to get so wrapped up in the business of church life – who's planning the next event – that we forget the larger purpose of the church. It is to be a model for the world of God's will for the human race. It is to be a society in which human differences are subordinate to the unity all people have in Christ. It is to challenge the state which looks to its own national interest rather than what is right for mankind. It is to challenge the state which claims it is specially chosen by God. It is to know God's forgiveness and wish others would know it also. It is to be generous. The church exists to show the world what the kingdom of God is like. If only we would obey!