

**People Can Change** First Week of Lent Wednesday, February 25, 2015 8:15 AM  
**Jon 3:1-10; Lk 11:29-32** (God has wanted the salvation of all people and provided for it from the time of Adam.)

Today we are reading from the prophet Jonah, who is not really a prophet; but rather Jonah is a kind of fictional work. But it's a fictional work with a very important theological teaching in it. What is that? The teaching is that **there is no determinism in human history**. Determinism means **that everything is predestined**, that everything has to happen a certain way. Now there are a lot of people who think this way, in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, in Christianity, in Judaism—things are determined. They think that God has already determined everything.

There is a grandiose way of talking that might lead to that sort of thinking. For example, there are promises God gives in the Old Testament. "If you follow my ways, I will bless you for a thousand generations." Well, wait a minute. If one generation does the right thing and follows God, then for a thousand generations it doesn't matter what people do; they will be blessed anyway? That doesn't make any sense. Gradually people thought about that. Vice versa if a generation is evil, how long is that supposed to continue? Can't people change? Of course they can. That's what Jonah is about. **People can change. Repentance is a real possibility.**

And to show that the author uses the example of the worse possible civilization **known in the ancient world**, the cruelest, the most brazen, the most corrupt: Assyria. And the capital of Assyria was **Nineveh**. In the story Jonah, who, mind you, has tried to get away from God, having been sent he tried to escape, got on a ship; there was a big storm, the sailors figured out who it was, or he admitted that he was causing the storm, they threw him overboard, he was swallowed by a fish, he was in the fish for a while, spit up, and now he finally decided, well, I guess I'll do it. And he goes to Nineveh. As I said, this is a nice story, but **it does teach something about repentance**. So he goes to Nineveh, and these cruel, evil people hear the message and they know it's true. They know that God is going to destroy them because they are worthy of being destroyed. Even the king, who is well-known for his heartlessness, his callousness, his cruelty, even the king of Assyria says, "Oh my goodness, maybe God will change his mind, so we will have to repent." And he decrees that everyone

should change. Well, as I said, **an interesting story, but told in a certain sort of sardonic way to the Jewish people**, I think around four hundred years before Christ. And the point was, look, if the worst people in the world can turn around, **if the worst people in the world can change, then so can we, and we need to**. So that's the basic story in the tradition.

Jesus uses it because in his day people are saying, well, show us something; prove that you are who you say you are; prove that your words really come from God. And this irritates Jesus, makes him angry. Why? He says, well, "The queen of the south came all the way from Ethiopia to hear Solomon, but what I say is more important than what Solomon said." He is being honest. It was far superior to anything Solomon said, far superior to all the books of wisdom Solomon gathered and all the proverbs and so on. Then he uses an example from Jonah. He said, "The men of Nineveh will rise at the judgment and condemn this generation." Why? They repented. Now, true, **it was a fictional story, but this story exemplified the possibly of repentance, but the people Jesus was dealing with, no, no repentance**.

The problem is that in Christian history this attitude has been applied to all Jews. That isn't what was intended. **Neither Jesus nor Luke nor Matthew nor Mark intended all Jews of all times to be included in this statement about what happened at this time**.

Again, **people can change. And we all are judged on the basis of our choices. And that has always been true universally from the time of Adam**. And that was a statement from Clement of Rome, that God has wanted the salvation of all people and provided for it from the time of Adam. Of courses this requires all kinds of different provisions because people are so different and people hear so many different things in different ways, and they respond differently. But the point is **God knows the dispositions of hearts**. And so there are in fact **many signs of the goodness of God all around us. They are basically people**, good people willing to do what is right even at great expense. These people are signs. They are more important than Solomon or Jonah, if people do respond to them for better or for worse, so the work of God bringing repentance to the world continues in our present day.