

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Commentators who have interpreted this book as a historical narrative identify Jonah with the 8th century B.C. prophet mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. However, a majority of scholars today date the book between 200 and 400 B.C. based on the language used and the fact that a number of words used in the book are not found elsewhere in the Old Testament but only in later Hebrew literature.

The book is not regarded by most scholars as historical, but rather as a parable with elements of allegory; with the chief concern of the author being the teaching of a religious message. There is a striking contrast between the character of Jonah and that portrayed as Elijah in the historical writings (1 Kings).

Our reading for today occurs after Jonah's encounter with the great fish. To better understand the context of the reading, we will study all of Jonah chapter 3.

3:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah [saying] ² "Set out for the great city of Nineveh, and announce to it the message that I will tell you."

Nineveh is the capital city of Assyria. The Assyrians destroyed Israel in 721 B.C. It was to Nineveh that God had directed Jonah to go when he had refused and tried instead to flee to Tarshish, the farthest boundary of the world. God keeps telling Jonah to minister to the people who are enemies of Israel. God has a plan for the Assyrians which Jonah recognizes but doesn't want to cooperate with – the Assyrians are to punish Israel for its unfaithfulness, and Jonah is asked to help.

³ So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD'S bidding.

Jonah has recognized the futility of flight after his experience with the storm and the fish; all Jonah can hope for now is that the Ninevites will reject his message and receive their just reward from God's wrath.

Now Nineveh was an enormously large city; it took three days to go through it.

A huge city – could have been the area which is known as the Assyrian triangle, an almost unbroken string of settlements about 26 miles long.

⁴ Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day's walk

announcing, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,”

The number 40 is indicative of change. It brings to mind the forty days of the flood, the forty years of the exodus. Notice how brief the message is – no long judgment speeches or oracles of admonition, judgment and doom. Could it be that Jonah, although complying with God’s wish is doing only the least possible to satisfy God’s demand?

⁵ when the people of Nineveh believed God;

The Hebrew expression is the same as that used for Abraham’s belief in Genesis 15:6 where he was justified.

they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes.

The fact that the king is not named suggests that the sacred writer was not interested in history.

⁷ Then he had this proclaimed throughout Nineveh, by decree of the king and his nobles: “Neither man nor beast, neither cattle nor sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not eat, nor shall they drink water.

Why animals too? Jeremiah 21:6 contains a prophecy applying to both.

⁸ Man and beast shall be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God; every man shall turn from his evil way and from the violence he has in hand.

This is an echo of Jeremiah’s call in Jeremiah 25:5. It is not clear whether the sackcloth and ashes of verse 5 is a result of this kingly decree or not.

⁹ Who knows, God may relent and forgive, and withhold his blazing wrath, so that we shall not perish.”

“Blazing wrath” is an expression of God’s anger (see Jeremiah 25:37-38).

¹⁰ When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out.

That the Lord will repent of the punishment He threatens if the nation repents of her evil ways is the explicit teaching of Jeremiah 26:3. Nineveh has repented and God has spared them – Israel did not repent and God later used Assyria to punish them.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Last week we heard St. Paul address the last of the scandals of the church at Corinth. Now he begins to answer various questions which have been asked of him. The one addressed today concerns marriage and virginity. We hear from his concluding remarks to this question.

29 I tell you, brothers, the time is running out.

Saint Paul expresses his conviction that the last period in salvation history is running its course. The parousia of the Lord may come at any time. The Christian must live as the Lord has commanded: in prayer and watchfulness awaiting the return of his Lord. He must keep himself detached from this world which is passing away.

From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, ³⁰ those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, ³¹ those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.

Even the married must live in detachment; fulfilling the duties of married life that involve them in the cares of this world, but without attaching their hearts to this world.

“Note that Paul says that the form of this world is passing away, not the substance of it. Therefore if the form of the world is going to perish, there is no doubt that everything in the world will vanish. It will all pass away. Every day the world gets older.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

Gospel - Mark 1:14-20

Last week we heard Jesus begin to gather His disciples around Him. This event takes place in Mark's gospel just after the account of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, the event which signaled the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and by His temptation in the desert. Again this week we hear of Him gathering followers.

14 After John had been arrested,

The verb translated here as “arrested” could also be translated as “handed over.” The same verb is used by Mark to refer to Jesus' passion and death. This makes John the Baptist's fate foreshadow Jesus' fate.

Jesus came to Galilee

Jesus has been baptized at the Jordan river in the Judean wilderness. Now He returns to the place of His ministry – Galilee, which is generally more favorable to Jesus than Judea will be (although Jesus is rejected by the people of Nazareth and John is ordered killed by Herod

Antiapas of Galilee).

proclaiming the gospel of God:

The good news came from God and had God's action as its content.

15 "This is the time of fulfillment.

Division of human history into periods was a common practice among Jewish writers. When the timetable reached its goal, then God's kingdom was to appear.

The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

This is the same type of call we heard in our first reading. The people have strayed from their covenant relationship with God. They have followed their own ways and their own gods and as a result have suffered. If they return to God and His ways they will know His presence and love again. Notice how discipleship and repentance are tied together in Jesus' message. As Saint Jerome said: "One who desires the kernel breaks the nut. So one who desires the joy of a holy conscience swallows down the bitterness of penance." (*Commentary on the Gospels*).

16 As he passed by the Sea of Galilee,

This makes the encounter seem almost casual.

he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen.

Fishing was a major industry on the Sea of Galilee. The Lord has chosen as His ministers the most unlikely candidates. It seems preposterous from a worldly point of view to choose as teachers people who have absolutely no experience, those who are unsophisticated and, at least at this point, are even unpleasant to be around due to the odors associated with their trade.

17 Jesus said to them, "Come after me,

Become a follower, one who walks in His footsteps.

and I will make you fishers of men."

A play on their occupation (former occupation)

18 Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.

Their response to the summons requires no contemplation or study, they immediately

obey.

“It has been demonstrated to us in Scripture that any too dear relations, crafts and trades are to be quite left behind for the Lord’s sake.” [Tertullian (A.D. 211), *On Idolatry* 12]

19 He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John.

With the inclusion of these two, the inner circle of Jesus apostles (Peter, James and John) is complete. These are the ones who will later witness the raising of Jairus’ daughter and Jesus’ transfiguration.

They too were in a boat mending their nets. 20 Then he called them. So they left their father

Peter and Andrew answered Jesus’ call by leaving behind their livelihood (their nets) whereas James and John responded by severing family ties. Mark’s primary purpose is to show that discipleship entails renunciation of the security of possessions and family ties.

“For James and John, called by the Lord, immediately leave quite behind both father and ship. Matthew is roused from the toll-booth. Even burying a father was too tardy a business for faith! None of those whom the Lord chose to Him said, ‘I have no means to live.’” [Tertullian (A.D. 211), *On Idolatry* 12]

“There must have been something divinely compelling in the face of the Savior. Otherwise they would not have acted so irrationally as to follow a man whom they had never seen before. Does one leave a father and follow a man in whom he sees nothing more than he sees in his father? They left their father of the flesh to follow the Father of the spirit. They did not leave a father; they found a Father. What is the point of this digression? To show that there was something divine in the Savior’s very countenance that men, seeing, could not resist.” [Saint Jerome (ca. A.D. 400), *Homily* 83].

Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

The name means “gift of Yahweh” and what a gift he gave in return; his sons.