

[68] Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: *1 Jonah 3:1-5, 10 / Psalm 25 / 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 / Mark 1:14-20*

Jonah has barely begun his cry of prophetic warning when the people of Nineveh repent and all of them “great and small put on sackcloth.” Why is there such an immediate reaction? It may be that they had heard the prior story of the prophet Jonah. The reputation of Nineveh as a wicked city is so severe, that Jonah seeks to flee his divine summons. Trying to flee by sea, God brings forth a great storm and acknowledging his fault, Jonah has the sailors throw him into the sea. What we learn here is that the failure of Jonah to be the prophet he has been called to be will result in the death or destruction of others. He will be held accountable. Jonah calls upon the Lord and he is swallowed by a great fish. Later, he is spat upon the shore to continue the mission given him. Jesus would speak about this as the one sign given in his own regard. The water symbolizes death and the big fish represents the tomb. Just as the sea and fish could not destroy Jonah, so too would the sea and the tomb not be able to contain Jesus. God shows his power. The people of Nineveh, either out of fear or love of the Lord, would change their ways. Similarly, after Christ’s victory over death, the apostles would go out to the nations and many would come to repent and to believe.

We are told that the citizens of Nineveh put on sackcloth. Sackcloth and ashes were signs of humiliation and repentance. As a coarse material made from goat’s hair, sackcloth was uncomfortable to wear. Symbolizing desolation or dying to self, many Christian believers would later employ it as a tool for penance. We would have to die to our old ways and life so as to be reborn and to live for Christ. Here in the story of Jonah, sackcloth and ashes served as a public sign of repentance before God. We were told that they even went to the extreme of placing sackcloth on their animals. They hoped that God might look down upon them, and seeing this incredible expression of contrition and remorse, grant them mercy from the impending judgment. Of course, God can read our hearts and would not be fooled. The outward sign rendered by the people of Nineveh worked because the external sackcloth and ashes signified an inward change or disposition. They were truly sorry for their sins. We read: “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.” Similarly, we as Christians should know that as long as there is breath in our bodies, there is no sin that God cannot forgive. All that is required is a contrite heart and a firm purpose of amendment.

The psalm brings to this theme of repentance and mercy another important component— the change of one’s life. We read: “Teach me your ways, O Lord. Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way.” Left to ourselves and we do not really know how to be good. God gives us guidance by his commands. Without God we would be uncertain as to right and wrong. Strip the commandments about honoring God from the Decalogue and the remaining

laws would become capricious. If there is no God and judgment, then why follow the rules? If there is no life beyond the grave, then why sacrifice for others? Love of God for some and fear of God for others is what marks the path between virtue and vice. The second reading emphasizes the shortness of life and thus infers the gravity of the coming judgment. This world is “passing away,” now is the appointed time.

The Gospel reading has Jesus taking up the cry of John the Baptizer, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” The message of Jonah is now extended to the whole world. Our Lord calls the apostles to himself because they will be his voice to the nations. Simon, Andrew, James and John are summoned. They all immediately leave their nets and our Lord tells them that they will be made into “fishers of men.” Jonah is thrown into the sea, not simply as bait for a big fish but that the citizens of Nineveh would repent and believe. Our Lord would make himself the bait in his paschal mystery to draw all men and women to himself. The apostle Paul would literally speak about the resurrection of Christ as “the hook” of Christianity. The center of the Christian kerygma is the person of Jesus. He is the kingdom of God breaking into our world. The calling of the apostles as “fishers of men” is often associated with the need for priestly vocations. However, every one of us has been called in baptism as a “missionary disciple.” Evangelism is not solely the responsibility of bishops, priests, deacons and a few Catholic lay evangelists. It is an obligation for all who claim to be Christian. Given this as the situation, the following points are essential:

- (1) We need a living personal and communal relationship with Jesus.
- (2) We need a faith informed by Scripture and the teaching Church.
- (3) We need an apostolate of service that expresses genuine charity for others.
- (4) We need to be regularly nurtured and healed by the sacraments.
- (5) We need prayer for spiritual life just as breathing gives physical life.

Why is all this essential? While almighty God can use broken instruments and even wicked people, to bring about his providence; the truth is that he rarely does so. It is hard to impossible to give what you do not have. If you do not know where to throw the net or if there is no bait for the hook, it is doubtful that you will catch anything. The fisherman or –woman, who never makes a catch, may also go hungry. The faith like love is only real when it is shared or given away. We must possess Christ if we would give him to others. We may all be sinners, but when the wounded are contrite, God can bring his healing to us and to all whom we meet.

- Are the five elements here realized in your life?
- Can you list any people who are believers because of how God has used you?
- As a sign of Jonah, how have you died so as to rise in the Lord?
- Have you promoted or supported vocations to the priesthood?