

January 24, 2021 The Unlikely Hero Homily: One of the key figures in the motion picture industry is the casting director. He or she is the one responsible for assigning roles in a film. The choice of the right actor to play a leading role is crucial to a film's success or failure. Many of us recall some of the popular biblically inspired films of the past in which actors shined in their respective roles. For example, Charlton Heston's portrayal of Moses in the *"The Ten Commandments"* was exceptional. Casting someone such as Woody Allen to play the part of Moses would have been nothing less than disastrous. The lovely Hedy Lamarr played the role of the seducer of Samson, Delilah. Casting Margaret Hamilton, who once played the part of the wicked Witch in the *"Wizard of Oz"* would have been foolish.

But what of the biblical figure of the prophet Jonah? Which actor would be the appropriate one to assume such a demanding role? If I were a casting director I would choose either Bill Murray or Jim Carrey, both well known for their comedic talent, and not Brad Pitt or George Clooney, both serious dramatic actors.

The unlikely hero of today's first reading, Jonah, is a hapless misfit and bumbler. In his marvelous portrait of Jonah, the Jewish writer and Nobel Prize winner, Elie Weisel, points out that of all the prophets of Israel only Jonah attempted to run away from God but, as it turned out, there was nowhere for him to run. Man can run away from man; he cannot run away from God! In the opening chapter of the Book of Jonah, we read, "So the Word of the Lord came to Jonah: 'Set out for the great city of Nineveh and preach against it for their wickedness has come before me.'" But Jonah made ready to flee to Tarshish away from the Lord. Jonah stubbornly tried to escape from his mission by resisting God's call. When God told Jonah to go in one direction, he made the decision to go in the opposite one.

Clearly the call to preach the message of conversion was no simple task. To tell the enemies of the Jews that they are not on the right path left Jonah exposed to grave danger. His censoring words must have angered the people. "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed", he thundered.

In his reflection on the Book of Jonah, Bishop Robert Barron declares that everyone who has an experience of God in the Old Testament is sent on a mission. He quotes the late Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, that if one is facing two options and one is more difficult than the other, than one must choose the more difficult one because it is likely the will of God.

What's more, Jonah, an ardently religious Jew, probably held the pagan Ninevites in contempt. He would much rather have the God of Israel destroy them and their city.

We live in a world increasingly indifferent to God and one that rejects the very notion of sin. In a world without sin, conversion is a meaningless concept. Admonishing the sinner, one of the Spiritual Works of Mercy, is a fine way to be rejected. At the very least, you may be expected to lose friends. I recall walking on Fifth Avenue in New York City one December afternoon when unexpectedly a half naked man appeared carrying a sign which said, "Repent, the end is near". He was largely ignored by the pedestrians, who likely considered him crazy. But is it not the case that those who have the courage to preach the need for conversion are treated in the same fashion?

We must never lose heart and feel inadequate to the tasks imposed upon us by the Lord.

One of the last century's most prominent psychologists, Abraham Maslow, maintained that too many of us suffer from a so-called "Jonah complex". As Jonah fled God's call, so too do many of us flee inner calls and ignore our dreams. The reason, according to Maslow, is that we think these challenges are beyond our abilities. Maslow tried to get his point across to his students by asking them a question. "Which of you hope to write the next great American novel?" The students laughed. It was not a realistic aspiration for them.

Recall the words of Saint Paul: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me".

Jonah eventually succeeded in his mission. The people of Nineveh heeded his dire warning and their lives were spared by a merciful God. The God of Israel desires our salvation. He has no interest in our destruction. Nevertheless, he respects our freedom to make choices, wise or foolish.

The unlikeliest of heroes are those who reluctantly, but faithfully, embrace God's call, even if it means pain and suffering.

God chooses each one of us for a reason.

Let us not fail Him.

Amen!