

Dcn. Jerry's Homily for 1-21-24, 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's first reading from Chapter 3 of the Book of Jonah is a wonderful story of a prophet calling people to repent, and a whole city repenting. Would that things were that easy today. The Book of Jonah is only 4 short chapters. And the example of repentance and God's mercy we get in today's readings just scratches the surface of the lessons and the tensions that affect our lives.

In Chapter 1, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, which is east of Israel. And what does Jonah do? He takes a boat in the Mediterranean which is in the opposite direction! Now, when you go in the opposite direction that God tells you, you're in for problems. And Jonah had two big problems. There is a huge storm and he is abandoned by his shipmates and thrown overboard. And then there was another problem. He became whale-bait. He is swallowed by the whale, spit up on land three days later, and then Jonah realizes he should do what the Lord is asking him to do. So he goes east to Nineveh, telling the people to repent, but he doesn't really have the right heart.

Then in Chapter 4, Jonah goes even further east in Nineveh, hoping to watch the destruction of Nineveh. Jonah is disappointed by God's mercy. He is angry at God because the people listened to the message God gave Jonah. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, Israel's great enemy. Jonah tried not to go Nineveh not because he was afraid of these pagan enemies but because he did not want them to repent. Jonah wanted God to destroy all 120,000 people rather than them turn to God!

That is really sad. You might be amazed that God can work even through reluctant prophets. What does that have to do with me and my faith journey?

We live in modern day Nineveh; a city, a country and a world in which many people have turned from God. Unlike Jonah who was upset that God showed mercy to those who had rejected God, those who had been Israel's enemies, we tend to accept the evil that is around us. We accommodate and tolerate evil. To some extent we even participate in evil.

A simple example is Roe vs. Wade. For 49 years many gathered in Washington to protest Roe. The media called those people anti-abortion rather than Pro-life. The media regularly underestimated the size of the gatherings. Last year and this year, in fact this weekend, folks continued to gather in DC and other places to emphasize the need for society to turn to God to protect the most vulnerable. Even though a number of our parishioners are attending the rally it is difficult to find any press coverage, and what coverage there is continues the bias. There aren't just some people, there are thousands of people; tens of thousands of people. You have to look at the video footage and make up your own mind.

What is God asking us to do? Well, He may be asking different people to do different things. But like Jonah, He is probably asking us to bring people to repentance. Jonah

received a special grace, that even though he was a reluctant prophet, pagans and strangers instantly responded to his message and repented.

It does not seem like our society is ready for repentance. We may not be ready to repent. It does not seem like many are willing to acknowledge wrongdoing. There are some who stand out. People from our parish are at the March for Life.

Perhaps God is not calling us to be prophets to our modern day Nineveh because He knows our message will fall on deaf ears. Perhaps He is calling us to a different prayerful experience. We need to listen, so we do what He wants, not what we want.

Two suggestions from examples in largely Communist countries. When Alexander Solzhenitsyn was released from the gulag and came to the West, he stated basically that if good people refused to participate in what they know is a lie that the world will be better. Today there are so many lies in society. We really need to search for the truth. If we do, others will see our example and perhaps be ready to change. Jim Harbaugh spoke to those gathered at the March about the importance of the unborn. Certainly, he placed truth above potential economic rewards.

We often see Venezuela used as an example of a country rich in natural resources but crippled by tyranny and moral corruption. But even there we see glimmers of hope from prophets who turn to Christ and His mother. Local Catholics in the city of Barquisimeto have a special devotion to Our Lady the Divine Shepherdess. Last Sunday they had a procession honoring Our Lady. As their custom developed over the years, they had a six-mile race before the procession and then a four-mile procession followed by a Mass. The race was a success, but only 1.6% of the people in the procession participated in the race. You see there were 44,000 people in the race and 2.7 million people in the procession. 2.7 million! In a Marian procession in a communist country. When the retired bishop who celebrated the Mass was asked about the event he said, "Well we have been having this procession for over 160 years and each year more people come than the last year." What a humble acknowledgment of God's grace at work.

I think the real lesson from Jonah's story is, we don't want to be "whale-bait". So if God is telling you something to do, listen. If He's telling you to go east, don't go west. If He is showing mercy to people who you think are terrible people, be joyful that somebody else is being saved.

God will work in His time and in His way. Let us prepare our hearts to do His will. Recognize that He wants conversion not chastisement. God works in His time not ours. We need to pray for grace and for others to be open to grace. Remember mercy and not chastisement.

~Dcn. Jerry