

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 3rd IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 Psalm 25 I Cor 7: 29-31 Mark 1: 14-20
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

DID YOU KNOW?

For those who preach at, or attend, daily Mass, we have some help for you. Our “Preachers’ Exchange” homepage has reflections and homilies on the daily readings by men and women Dominican preachers from around the world. We also have a link to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ page which features daily video preachings on the same readings.

Go to: <https://PreacherExchange.com> and check the “Daily” listings in the center of the page.

If you ever doubted a sense of humor in the bible, read the Book of Jonah. Today’s selection seems to paint a rosy picture of the prophet. Jonah sounds like your “A-number-one prophet” – God gives him a charge and he immediately sets off to fulfill it. He preaches to the citizens of Nineveh, they repent and the prophet is a success in his mission – end of story. Not so fast. There’s a more human and humorous twist to the tale and there’s an opportunity to apply the story to ourselves – and thus experience its grace.

The Book of Jonah is unusual. Unlike the other prophetic books, it doesn’t contain the prophet’s preaching. Instead, it is about his call and response to God’s will. In the beginning of the book Jonah refuses God’s commission to preach to the Assyrians in Nineveh. The Assyrians were hated conquerors and Jonah wanted nothing to do with them. He realized that through his preaching God was offering them a chance for mercy and this was incomprehensible to him. So, Jonah fled by boat and we know what happened: there was a storm at sea, he was cast overboard, swallowed by a great fish and three days later, “...the Lord commanded the fish to spew Jonah upon the shore” (2:11). That’s how the prophet found himself near Nineveh. In today’s passage God again charges Jonah to preach to its citizens. (Our lectionary selection leaves out a phrase in the first verse, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a SECOND TIME.”)

God wants what God wants: to extend mercy to all people, those we consider good, as well as those we reject as unworthy and bad. What had the wicked Assyrians in

Nineveh done to earn God's offer of forgiveness? Nothing. Once again we have a story of grace. It is not based on merit, if it were, it wouldn't be grace.

The Ninevites heard Jonah's message and repented. But they weren't the only ones – God repented too! How unusual does that sound to our ears?! But in the Old Testament God repents twice as often as humans do. God repents making humans and then causes the flood (Gen 6: 6). But far more common is when God relents and doesn't punish – as we see in today's passage. In the Hebrew scriptures people pray for God to repent; for God to have a change of heart so that they don't receive the punishment they know they deserve. Jonah knew if he preached to the Ninevites and they repented, God would too. He tells God, "I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish" (4:2).

Jonah knew his God was more prone to forgive than to hold a grudge and punish and he would have preferred that the Ninevites receive punishment for all their cruelties toward the Israelites. Still, our Jewish ancestors kept this record of God's unexplainable mercy. They needed it to remind themselves that when they transgressed God's ways and they certainly had a long record of doing that (!), if they repented, God would take them back – God would also repent and not punish them. After all, that's what God did for the Ninevites, and does for us too, whenever we turn to God for mercy.

St. Paul sounds a bit cavalier about marriage, don't you think? "From now on, let those having wives act as not having them." But we have to hear him in context. The first Christians believed that they were living in the last days; the world was soon to end, and Jesus would return. So, with that sense of urgency, he stressed the importance of serving the Lord and putting all other worldly issues aside. Many, many generations have passed, and Paul's sense of urgency seems quaint to us. So much time has elapsed since Paul wrote, still we could reflect on his sense of the immediacy of Christ's return and catch from him the importance he places on the priority of serving the Lord, in whatever our state of life.

"Moving right along"...this expression seems to fit Mark's gospel. Jesus was just baptized in the Jordan (1: 9-11) and tempted in the desert (1:12-13). Mark's description of these events is terse and to the point. Now Mark moves on immediately to Jesus' preaching in Galilee. Jesus is on the move and Mark's narrative is breathless, as if Jesus were hurrying; impatient to get to Jerusalem. As

we shall see, those Jesus invites to follow him are told that he and they are going to Jerusalem; to accept his call to discipleship means picking up the cross and following him to his place of suffering. Mark's gospel will be an invitation to follow Jesus and to have hope, "the kingdom is at hand."

The Jewish people had suffered under many oppressors, as they waited for God to finally come and begin a new kingdom. Now, with Jesus, their hopes were being fulfilled. Through Jesus' preaching people were being invited to turn away from false securities and misplaced loyalties. Jesus urged them to accept God's rule in their lives. The first manifestation of God's nearness and power was the offer of forgiveness and a possibility of living a new way of life – which Jesus would demonstrate in his own life of service and love.

Mark continues the tale as he succinctly moves on to Jesus' call of his disciples. The other evangelists spend more time on the call and response of the first disciples. Mark doesn't. Without filling in details he gives us a stark and dramatic narrative: Jesus offers a simple invitation, and the fishermen drop everything to follow him. Such trust! Such spontaneity! Such risk!

The financial world is crumbling around us. There are many complex reasons for this collapse, but there hasn't been a lack of dishonest and deceitful people who have lured many into risky investments and then defrauded them of their life's savings. So, when we speak of trust and throwing one's life and future into the hands of someone else, we get cautious and nervous. We want to check things out first – hedge our bets. What kind of sacrifice are you asking of me? What guarantees are you offering? Where is the profit in it for me? Can you assure me I won't lose everything? These are just some of the questions I would want to ask before throwing my lot in with the passerby Jesus who says, "Come after me...."

Those who follow Jesus in this gospel will learn from his actions and words what accepting the invitation to discipleship entails. He will not promise them great success, vast profits and an affluent lifestyle. Quite the opposite. Those who respond to his invitation will be asked to deny themselves and, even in loss, to keep on following Jesus.

Jesus isn't wasting much time as he sets out and calls his first followers. They must see in him a rare opportunity, that he is ushering in "the time of fulfillment." What satisfies the deepest parts of ourselves and completes us? In other words,

what fills us up? Jesus is offering his disciples and us, an opportunity to see that in him, lie all our hopes. In Jesus, God has drawn close to us: “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” If we say “yes,” to his invitation and trust him, then we turn from what has diverted our attentions and respond to Jesus’ invitation to “repent and believe” – and again we throw our lot in with him.

Mark touches a familiar chord in us. We know what it is like to have to make a quick decision in favor of following Christ. We hear his invitation “Come follow me,” each day as life presents us with choices. Shall we forgive when asked? Shall we help someone in need? Shall we buy less for ourselves and give more to the poor? Shall we see the injustice or turn a blind eye? In these, and so many other occasions, we hear the same invitation Jesus made to those fishermen and like them, we put other considerations aside to follow him.

QUOTABLE

Anyone who aspires to announce the Gospel needs, above all, to love the person to be evangelized, to know him or her with the heart and trust fully the power of the Gospel and the action of the Spirit, which invite the people of each culture to encounter salvation in their own way. We need to know how to approach people with respect and an attitude of listening and learning, to be stripped of the baggage of our own culture (without overestimating it) in order to avoid all ethnocentrism and colonialism; to use the language and symbolism of those to be evangelized, incorporating the specific values of the other culture.

--the General Chapter of the Dominican Friars, at Mexico City, 1992

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

As Jesus passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother
casting their nets into the sea....

Jesus said to them, “Come after me and I will make you fishers of
people.”

Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.

Reflection:

We hear Jesus' invitation, "Come follow me," each day, as life presents us with choices. Shall we forgive when asked? Shall we help someone in need? Shall we buy less for ourselves and give more to the poor? Shall we see the injustice or turn a blind eye? In these, and so many other occasions, we hear the same invitation Jesus made to those fishermen and like them, we put other considerations aside to follow him.

So, we ask ourselves:

- What recent choices have I made that show my desire to follow Christ?
- What changes do I have to make in my life to follow him more fully?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"When God saw by their actions..." (*Jonah 3:10*)

Each of today's readings focuses on **actions**. These Scriptures call us to express our love for God, not just in private but in public and visible ways. This is true of us as individuals, but even truer of us as a parish. Our actions as a parish should identify this community as followers of Jesus who try together to live out the Gospel in real and visible ways.

At last year's Regional Parish Social Ministry Conference in Raleigh, Father Brian Massingale shared the following characteristics of a ***Justice-Seeking Parish***.

Please consider and pray over each characteristic. Does Sacred Heart demonstrate that characteristic? How can we better show the love and justice of God in how we live and act together as a parish?

- The parish is *the place and agent of conversion*, believing in Good News for the poor, making the poor a priority.
- The parish is *a place of compassion* (no "us" and "them" but "we").
- The parish *reflects the importance of justice and social outreach in the parish budget*.
- The parish *has an ongoing awareness of the needs of the poor*.
- The parish *presents and integrates Catholic Social Teaching* in ALL of the educational efforts of the parish.
- The parish *celebrates every Sunday as "Social Justice Sunday"* because of the

preaching, prayer, and music.

- The parish *is known for welcoming those whom society disdains, dismisses, and despises.*
- The parish *is involved in the civic life of its community.*
- The parish *has a Social Concerns Committee, which embraces a “consistent ethic of life.”*
- The parish *Social Concerns Committee does not do all of the parishes “justice work,” but is its conscience, calling the parish to express its faith by acting for justice.*
- The parish *engages in public advocacy, speaking on behalf of the least of its community, our country, and the world.*
- The parish *cultivates gratitude and thanksgiving, rather than duty and obligation, as motives for caring for the least.*

What can I do?

If you are part of any parish group or ministry, take these characteristics to a group meeting and consider them together. How can we do better?

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Byron L. Wariung #T368849 (On death row since 7/2/07)
- Wayne A. Laws #0234897 (8/21/85)
- Henry L. Mc Collum #0265106 (11/22/91)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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