

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time – B

We already 3 weeks into 2024; long enough for the new year's resolutions to have been broken and then forgotten. But, according to our readings this weekend, we don't need to wait – nor should we wait – until next year or any other time to make necessary changes to our lives.

We begin with the reading from the prophet Jonah, most well-known for being swallowed up by the big fish and then spat back out on land. God had given Jonah a message to deliver to the people of the great city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the primary enemy of Israel at that point in its history. And the message was not a pleasant one: basically, “You're going to be destroyed.” And Jonah was very reluctant to deliver this bad news: so reluctant that he tried to flee in the opposite direction by crossing the sea, which is when the fish swallowed him.

Eventually Jonah realized that God was sovereign and that if he wanted Jonah to deliver this message, there was nowhere he could go to get away from this obligation. So he finally went to Nineveh where he began to proclaim:

“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed.” Note that he did not mention repentance, but that is exactly what the Ninevites did: even though this was the God of the Jews, which they were not, they immediately repented, putting on sackcloth and fasting for the evil they had done. And because of this, their city was not destroyed.

And then in our Gospel reading, we hear the first words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Mark. Incidentally, his first words are not, “God loves you” – even though this is a true statement – nor are they, “I’m OK; you’re OK.” Rather, Jesus says, “This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels and is pretty fast-paced. Throughout it there is a sense of urgency. The word “immediately” is used over and over again. Incidentally, in the short passage of Mark’s Gospel we just heard today, this word “immediately” appears twice in other translations, but for whatever reason, in the translation used in our lectionary, this word is replaced by the less urgent-sounding word “then”, which I think is

unfortunate, because it loses that sense of urgency conveyed by the original language in which this Gospel was written.

Regardless, Jesus begins his public ministry, after years of leading a quiet life as a carpenter in Nazareth, by proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand and calling everyone to repentance. And we also hear how Jesus calls his first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. And it says they abandoned their nets and followed Jesus.

Jesus' first words in today's Gospel are meant for all, and that includes us. He calls each one of us to repentance. And repentance, conversion of heart, is the key that unlocks the door to everything else in the spiritual life. It is only by recognizing that we are not perfect, and becoming aware of – or at least seeking to become aware of – our sins and our faults, that we can begin to grow in our relationship with God and to grow in holiness. If we fail to do this, if we are convinced that we basically have nothing to ask forgiveness God for, then we are unable to open our hearts up to let God in.

No, repentance is not easy. It means taking an honest, hard look at ourselves, at how we are living, at the movements of our hearts, at what is going on in our minds, at how we treat others, especially those closest to us or whom the Lord has put into our lives. This is not for the purpose of beating ourselves up over and over again and feeling bad. As I said, repentance is the key to being in relationship with God. It's only by being aware that are sinners, of the ways in which we have sinned, and of what needs to change within us that we can begin to let God into our hearts and our lives. And when we do this, God will begin to change us and transform us. He will begin to give us the grace we need to change our ways, so that we might live in right relationship with Him and with others.

Sin creates disorder in our world, in our hearts, and in our relationships. We all experience that disorder in different ways and to different degrees each day. It is in a way a vicious circle: the more we sin, the less resistant we will be to the temptations that inevitably come along, and the more sin and disorder enter to the world. And sin harms us, others, the world around us. It creates more disorder. All the wars going on in the world are the rotten fruits of the disorder caused by sin. War doesn't just come out of nowhere: it is the

product of multitudes of sins built up over time, that finally explode into the worst that human beings can inflict upon one another.

In any relationship of two people, if things start to break down, it is necessary for both parties to take an honest look at themselves to see if and in what way they have been at fault, to admit it to one another, to forgive one another, and to resolve to change. That's the only way the relationship can be restored. If one or both fail to do this, the relationship may continue, but it will not be healthy, and the problems will just fester.

So it is in our relationship with God, with one huge difference: God has never sinned and is not at fault; He only desires our greatest good, and so He has nothing to repent of. It is we who must acknowledge what we need to repent of. But then we can be assured of God's forgiveness. Because Jesus suffered and died on the Cross for us – the One without sin, taking upon himself the punishment for the sins of the human race – we can be assured that God will have mercy on us every time we turn back to him.

And we should not delay in doing this. As St. Paul says in our second reading, “time is running out”! And then he goes on to speak in rather figurative language: “Husbands act as not having wives, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning,” and so on. Especially regarding the first example, he is not speaking literally here! But he is trying to make a point: we must always be focused on our ultimate goal which is heaven and so make God the center of our lives.

Let us imitate the example of the people of Nineveh, who immediately repented of their sins. Let us imitate the examples of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who immediately abandoned their nets – their livelihoods – to follow Jesus. As we know, they were not immediately perfect. But it is in following Jesus that they were made perfect, and that God will also make us perfect like himself.

- **January 21, 2024 at St. Mary’s, Spring Lake**