

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

REFLECTION 1: JESUS' IMAGE OF FISHING

Some years ago Pope Benedict, in his Christmas message to the City and the world, had this to say: 'Invoking the ancient liturgical antiphon: O Emmanuel, our king and lawgiver, hope and salvation of the peoples: come and save us, O Lord our God'. This, Pope Benedict said is 'the cry of men and women in every age, who sense that by themselves they cannot prevail over difficulties and dangers. They need to put their hands in a greater and stronger hand, a hand that reaches out to them from on high. That hand is Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary. It is that hand that God extends to humanity, to draw us out of the mire of sin and to set us firmly on rock, the secure rock of this truth and his love. Jesus Christ was sent by God the Father to save us above all from the evil, deeply rooted in men and women in history, the evil of separation from God'. This, Pope Benedict said is the great evil, from which we humans cannot save ourselves unless we rely on God's help.

Inherent to the life and growth of all believers is our awareness of the constant need for repentance. Through our willingness to accept repentance, believers become witnesses who invite others to draw near to God as well. The fictional Jonah (First Reading) was a medium of grace through which the Ninevites recognise their need for repentance and are saved. Jonah's mission proved successful not because of his own virtue, but by virtue of God's universal mercy. Jonah's story reminds us that the truth of the Gospel may sometimes be spoken through less than worthy preachers. It is the message, not the medium that reaches out with grace and salvation.

When Jesus recruited disciples to join in his efforts at preaching the message, 'Repent and believe in the Gospel', he also offered them a mission. With his invitation 'Come after me and I will make you fishers of people', he called them and us to embrace repentance and faith as our way of life and then, to extend that same blessing to others by word and example. Of all the images he could have chosen, Jesus chose the image of fishing. Obviously this was a profession familiar to those he called to follow him. There are many good lessons that any of us might learn from someone who goes fishing for a living.

Regardless of whether one fishes with a net or a rod with a line, the fisher must go to where the fish are and offer them something that will entice them to take the bait. Disciples too, can be more effective when they are willing to be mobile. Often this requires leaving the comfort of home to venture into those public and private places where people live their lives. We have been entrusted with the 'bait' of the good news, which becomes more attractive when it is paired with our own good example. Another lesson we might learn from the fishers is to work without discriminating as to the worthiness of others. There is no sign at the end of a fishing line that says 'Good fish only' – all humankind are invited. Fishers do not keep regular hours, they do not expect fish to make appointments to be present, so those who harvest them must accommodate their schedule, be persistent and wait. We too, as we relay the

message handed onto us by Jesus to transmit to the next generation, must be patient and wait for the seed of that message to take root and grow – to realise the dream that God’s grace can eventually bring sinners to repentance and faith.

REFLECTION 2:

FOLLOW ME

In today’s Gospel Jesus invites his first disciples to follow him. They abandon their nets and immediately go after him. Two thousand years later many people are following Jesus. Christians now make up nearly 1/3rd of the world’s population. China is still officially an atheist country and the wonder is how the faith has survived throughout the long years of Communist rule. Yet, for every sheep in the Christian fold, two more are out there waiting for the Good Shepherd to find them. As followers of his we have all a vocation to encourage those who have yet to hear him say to them, ‘Come, follow me’.

Our readings for today open the scene with the story of Jonah. The Book of Jonah in the Bible is unique in that it is fiction, but fiction with a powerful message. Jonah, a Jew, was sent by God to preach repentance to the gentile people of Nineveh. But he was reluctant to do so. So he was gobbled up by a whale and remained in its belly for three days and three nights until he was spat out on the beach of the city of Nineveh. It was indicative of the fact that God’s merciful forgiveness and caring involvement was to be enjoyed by all peoples and were not the exclusive prerogative of Israel. Jonah delivered his message of repentance as God’s prophet: ‘Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed’ he preached. The Ninivites responded promptly and through their belief in God’s words through his prophet, they fasted in sackcloth and ashes for 40 days.

When Jesus was asked for a melodramatic sign from the scribes and Pharisees, that he was truly the Messiah, he uttered these astonishing words, ‘No sign will be given to this evil and adulterous generation, except the sign of Jonah’. Just as Jesus rested in the grave for three days and three nights, so like Jonah in the belly of the whale, he would rise again on the third day. Jesus was referring to the Paschal Mystery of his passion, death and resurrection.

The story of Jonah compliments our Gospel today from Mark. The first words of Jesus which Mark records are a type of summary of his preaching, a kind of manifesto. Jesus declares that the time is ‘fulfilled’. The events that are about to unfold are the climax of a long period of waiting – a special period for us and the world. Jesus declares that the kingdom of God is at hand – God’s universal rule that he is the God of all people and of the universe. Notice that the double word ‘repent and believe’ is immediately followed by the double deed of ‘leaving and following’. The summoning of the disciples to join Jesus was an essential part of his calling, and we ask ourselves the question, are we also to repent and believe? And the answer the disciples gave is truly ours. Jesus gently nudges us through Mark’s Gospel to leave behind the nets that entangle us; shedding whatever is unwholesome in our lives as we follow Jesus into the New Year.