

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, B cycle, Jan 25, 2015

First Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (*Jonah finally preaches to the Ninevites and they repent*)

Responsorial Psalm 25: "Teach me your ways, O Lord."

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 (*The world as we know it is passing away*)

Gospel: Mark 1:14-20 (*Reform your lives and believe the Good News*)

♪ We are many parts, we are all one body, and the gifts we have, we are given to share.

*May the Spirit of love make us one indeed. One the love that we share, one our hope in despair,
one the cross that we bear. ♪*

That song is one that the prophet Jonah needed to hear. His story is a prophesy of the gift of love that was to come through Christ. The whole book of Jonah is a wonderful parable - like the ones Jesus later told. It would make a great mini-series. But we only heard part of the story today and the reading in the Lectionary is really misleading.

Do you know the story? Jonah gets a call to preach to the people of Ninevah, which is in present day Iraq, north of Baghdad. But he was a racist, his fear of the Ninevites had hardened into bigotry. He doesn't **want** God to have mercy on them, so instead of going *East* to Ninevah when God calls him, he goes *West* to Tarshish, which is present day Spain - the ends of the earth according to the people of his time.

There is a storm, the pagan sailors believe that the storm is caused by Jonah's running away from God - and the prophet tells them that they are right! So they reluctantly decide to throw Jonah overboard. Then they pray to the God of *Israel*, and the sea becomes calm.

Jonah, meanwhile, gets swallowed by a big fish or a whale. And guess where the fish went? Right to Ninevah, where he spits Jonah up on the shore. Then Jonah *finally* delivers God's message - and that is where the reading for today picks up the story. The people repent from the king to the lowliest person. Even the animals put on sackcloth and fast - and God blesses them, but Jonah is still angry that God has forgiven the Ninevites.

The lessons God is teaching through this story are as profound today as they were in their own time. First, God wants **everyone** to be saved. Second, even prophets and the institutions they represent can get it wrong. Third, even if God's good news gets resisted, the Word of the Lord wins in the end. I think the most profound and prophetic words in the book of Jonah are when Jonah explains to God why he ran away.

The prophet says, "*I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind and always ready to change your mind and not punish.*" For us, as disciples of Christ, that gets translated into - Jesus gave his life for **all** people, Catholics and Protestants, Christians and non-Christians, even for agnostics and atheists. That is the Good News the Church is called to accept and pass on.

Today, in the Gospel passage I just read, Jesus says to Peter & Andrew, to James & John, and to you & me: "*This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives & believe the Good News!*" Then he gets really personal: Follow me, & use your gifts to spread the Good news of God's love & mercy.

I think that Good News is still hidden - even to some who say they are Christians. Do you believe that God loves you and is always ready to give and to forgive? We are called to take that personally. Too many people in our world do not believe that they are loved, and so find it difficult to believe that we are all members of God's family, with all its diversity of cultures and languages and races & religions. We see this played out when those in authority use excessive violence and those who are oppressed react with lethal violence.

I read a post on facebook recently which quoted Kareem Abdul-Jabbar referring to events in Ferguson and NYC. Here is what he said:

"The Los Angeles Times referred to the New York City protests as 'anti-police marches,' which is grossly inaccurate... Police are not under attack, institutional racism is. Trying to remove sexually abusive priests is not an attack on Catholicism nor is removing ineffective teachers an attack on education. Bad apples, bad training, -- and bad officials who blindly protect them - are the enemy. And any institution worth saving should want to eliminate them too."

By our Baptism, Jesus calls all of us here to live as disciples of the same Lord who called the apostles and prophets. We are called to fish for people - by inviting the whole human race to receive the gift of life and mercy. We are called to challenge those in power & the institutions they represent to repent of their oppression of the poor & vulnerable. We are called to challenge the exclusion of those who are different and sometimes even to expose the guilt of the rich & powerful. He sends us out, like Jonah and Peter and Paul, to spread the Good News of God's love & truth and mercy.

We are at the end of the week of prayer for Christian Unity - which goes from Jan 18-25 - but sometimes we forget that we share the same Baptism with other Christian believers. This week Christians all over the world are reminding us to **be** the answer to the prayer of Jesus that all may be one as he and the Father are one.

Sometimes we followers of Christ are passionate about different causes or pray in different ways and can be tempted to condemn or ridicule those who do things differently. Yet we are *all* called to value and respect human life from its very beginning until natural death. We are called to challenge the oppression of someone whose skin is a different color, or who speaks a different language, or who has a different sexual orientation; we are called to challenge the easy justification of war in the name of security and national pride.

We are all called to pray for change in each of those areas. We are called to support one another in what we do even as each of us is called & gifted to put our time and energy into different kinds of action.

As we pray for unity among Christians, we need to remember that whether we pray like Francis & Clare of Assisi with the wonder of creation, or like Ignatius of Loyola with our imagination & the Word of God, ~ whether we pray the Rosary *or* the Psalms; ~ whether we watch EWTN *or* go to Call to Action meetings, Whether we are building the economy or protesting racism, We are one family here, with one Father & one Lord. We are filled with the same Spirit who gathers us into one flock while respecting, using & celebrating our different gifts.

In the 2nd reading, St. Paul writes, "The world as we know it is passing away." As we celebrate Eucharist today, we enter into a world that does not pass away. Because, as one of my mentors used to say, "God is absolute, everything else is relative."

We need to pray the words of the Responsorial Psalm, a prayer Jesus was so familiar with, saying or singing: "*Teach me your ways, O Lord.*" We need to hear the Good News that God loves us and that we are **all** brothers & sisters with one Father. We are called to live the prayer that we sang in the song I began with:

*♪ We are many parts, we are all one body, and the gifts we have , we are given to share.
May the Spirit of love make us one indeed. One the love that we share, one our hope in despair,
one the cross that we bear. ♪*