

## Homily for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time January 24, 2021

Our first reading comes from a short but rather interesting book of the Old Testament: the Book of Prophet Jonah. Unlike other prophetic books it is not a collection of the prophet's oracles but primarily the story of the prophet himself.

The book is only four brief chapters long but has perplexed biblical scholars. Is it an historical book or more of an extended parable? Who is the author? When was it written? None of these questions can be conclusively answered.

As Catholics we are free to understand the Book of the Prophet Jonah as literal history or as a tale inspired by the Holy Spirit to relate certain truths about God and His saving will. Let's briefly summarize the book.

It is set during the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel (early 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). At the time a serious threat to Israel was growing in the northwest; the Assyrian Empire. Assyria's expansionary success was mainly due to two factors: their superior weapons and military tactics, and their reliance on sheer, unadulterated terror. Their monuments are proudly covered with images of other nations and peoples being massacred, tortured, enslaved and deported. And Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

This sets the stage for the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet.

One day the word of God comes to Jonah calling him to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. Instead, Jonah goes to the seaport of Joppa and boards a ship heading in the exact opposite direction, west to Tarshish (possibly in southern Spain; in other words, as far away as he could get!).

On the voyage a terrible storm arises and the crew begins throwing cargo overboard and crying out to their pagan gods for deliverance. Jonah is asleep in the ship's hold. When found he is awakened and told to also beseech his god for protection.

The crew cast lots to see who has brought this calamity upon them. The lot falls upon Jonah. He confesses that he was running away from God and tells the sailors to throw him overboard in order to calm the storm. At first they refuse but finally acquiesce and toss Jonah into the sea. The storm immediately subsides.

In the water Jonah does not drown but is instead swallowed by a great fish. For three days and nights he remains in its belly. He prays to God in repentance for deliverance. The great fish finally spews Jonah out on the shore.

God again tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim His message to its inhabitants. Jonah proceeds to the great city and upon entering declares, *"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*

When the message reaches the king, he puts on sackcloth and ashes and calls on all the inhabitants, human and beast alike, to fast and do

the same. The inhabitants repent and so God relents from punishing them.

Seeing this Jonah becomes angry at God and in prayer tells Him that this is why he initially tried to flee; because, *“I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity”* (4:2). In his bitterness Jonah asks God to let him die. He leaves the city and watches from a distance to see if it will be destroyed.

God causes a large plant to grow and shade Jonah from the scorching sun. This makes Jonah happy. But the next morning God has a worm kill the plant. Jonah again becomes bitterly angry, wanting to die. God uses this as a teachable moment; pointing out how Jonah was concerned about one plant but begrudged God for being concerned about the 120,000 inhabitants of Nineveh *“who do not know their right hand from the left”* and about their animals (4:11). With this the story ends. We are left hanging as to Jonah’s response.

What lessons can we learn from this story?

First, we are reminded that God seeks the *repentance* of those who do wrong not their destruction. Jonah sees only their evil (and make no mistake, the Late Assyrian Empire was evil) but God sees the good in the human heart and the possibility of change. God will punish those who continue in their wrongdoing, but His primary concern, as Saint Peter tells us, is *“not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9). When we see evil flourishing and

unpunished, we may be tempted to interpret it as proof of God's indifference. But what it may actually indicate is His longsuffering patience with all of us. Jonah did not weep over the city of Nineveh but Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

Second, and related, God's mercy and compassion extend to all people because He loves all people. Jonah represents the Chosen People of God's covenant; the Ninevites represent those outside the covenant. God holds special those with whom He has entered into covenant (and we are the people of the New Covenant) but that does not mean He is indifferent to those outside of it. Being inside and being outside are not the same, but they are not meant to be demarcations of God's love and areas of concern. When Jesus saw the multitudes *"He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"* (Matthew 9:36).

Third, God uses His chosen people to witness to the world. We are chosen for mission. We are not meant to simply stay within our comfort zone. We are given the difficult task of calling out sin but for the purpose of calling *to* repentance. We are given the task of letting people know that God is real, God is just, but God is also merciful. Most of all, that God is love. As Jesus told His disciples, *"You did not choose Me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last"* (Jn 15:16).

Fourth, this leads us to recognize that God's plan of salvation extends to all people and that we are intimately involved in His plan, both as a Church and as individual members of it. The Jews were called to

prepare the way of the Lord; to be the cultivated garden, so to speak, in which God would plant His Son. We are called to proclaim the gospel of His Son to all the nations. As Saint Paul tells us, God “*desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Timothy 2:4).

Fifth and finally, ignoring or refusing to be concerned about the moral and spiritual wellbeing of others is harmful to us and to them. Jonah’s attitude was driving him away from God, changing how he looked at his faith, and turning him into an angry person. And it was having negative effects on those around him as well. The ship’s crew symbolize that negative effect (do not our sins and negative attitudes affect those around us?). And how about the people of Nineveh, what would have happened to them had Jonah not reluctantly accepted his mission?

God called Jonah to work with Him; Jesus called Simon and Andrew, James and John to work with Him; and God in Jesus Christ calls you and I to work with Him. God calls imperfect human beings to participate in His plan. God does not expect all of us to be involved in His work in the same way as Jonah or the apostles but He does expect something of us. It is not always easy or fun to step out and step up, but it is what being a Christian is about.

The Book of the Prophet Jonah ends leaving us hanging as to what was Jonah’s final response to God? I think that was intentional. For God is waiting for the listeners response too. He is waiting on you and me.