

Liturgy of the Word

First Reading Jon 3:1-5. 10 A reading from the prophet Jonah

The Ninevites renounced their evil ways.

The word of the Lord was addressed to Jonah: 'Up!' he said 'Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to them as I told you to.' Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was a city great beyond compare: it took three days to cross it. Jonah went on into the city, making a day's journey. He preached in these words, 'Only forty days more and Nineveh is going to be destroyed.' And the people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least.

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behaviour. And God relented: he did not inflict on them the disaster which he had threatened.

The word of the Lord.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 24:4-9. R. v.4

(R.) Teach me your ways, O Lord.

1. Lord, make me know your ways. Lord, teach me your paths. Make me walk in your truth, and teach me: for you are God my saviour. (R.)
2. Remember your mercy, Lord, and the love you have shown from of old. In your love remember me, because of your goodness, O Lord. (R.)
3. The Lord is good and upright. He shows the path to those who stray, he guides the humble in the right path; he teaches his way to the poor. (R.)

Second Reading 1 Cor 7:29-31 A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

The world as we know it is passing away.

Brothers, our time is growing short. Those who have wives should live as though they had none, and those who mourn should live as though they had nothing to mourn for; those who are enjoying life should live as though there were nothing to laugh about; those whose life is buying things should live as though they had nothing of their own; and those who have to deal with the world should not become engrossed in it. I say this because the world as we know it is passing away.

The word of the Lord.

Gospel Acclamation Mk 1:15

Alleluia, alleluia! The kingdom of God is near: believe the Good News! Alleluia!

Gospel Mk 1:14-20 A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

Repent, and believe the Good News.

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

As he was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men.' And at once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending their nets. He called them at once and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Scripture Commentary

by Brendan Byrne SJ

Today we begin the sequence of readings from Mark's Gospel, the proper Gospel of Year B. A few general words about this Gospel may be appropriate.

The Gospel of Mark, the shortest and earliest of the four gospels, is essentially a gospel of liberation. It takes (Second) Isaiah's 'good news' ('gospel') of freedom for Israel exiled in Babylon (Isa 40:9; 41:7; 42:7-8; 61:1) and applies this to the liberation brought by Jesus. Jesus comes as the Son of God, empowered by the Spirit (1:10), to wrest human beings from all the captivities in which they find themselves. From the start Mark portrays Jesus locked in a mighty conflict with the demonic, best understood as referring to controlling forces of various kinds – all that stunts human lives, alienating them from true humanity and life-giving relationship with God. Jesus comes as the 'Stronger one' (1:7), who will 'bind' Satan (3:27), dispossess him of his grip upon human life, and in its place, proclaim and inaugurate the 'Rule' (Kingdom) of God.

As the gospel unfolds, a new story also begins to emerge: Jesus will effect this liberation only by personally entering into the pain and suffering of this world, even to the point of death (8:31-37). Jesus' disciples have great difficulty in accepting this truth and following him along this way (8:31-32; 9:32; 10:32-34). At the cross, all seems to end in defeat, with Jesus abandoned not only by his closest disciples but also, seemingly, by God (15:33-37). But the discovery of an empty tomb three days later and an angelic explanation point to the victory of God and the instruction to return to Galilee where they are to meet him as risen Lord.

Mark's gospel seems composed for a community of believers recently devastated by persecution. This has all but wiped out leadership and perhaps hope itself. Hence the gospel's single-minded focus upon the suffering of Jesus, and his efforts to get the disciples to understand the meaning of suffering and its role in facilitating the divine mastery of evil.

The gospel lingers over details omitted by other evangelists, offering in this way a rich and concrete picture of the passing human scene. But it is remarkable also for its 'epiphanies': the disclosure of divine presence and power out of an otherwise very human portrayal of Jesus (cf. 4:35-41; 6:47-52). This comes to a climax when the curtain of the Temple is ripped across as Jesus dies and the centurion who has supervised the execution becomes the first to acknowledge the true status of the abandoned figure hanging upon the cross: 'Truly this

man was the Son of God' (15:37-39).

The Gospel for today offers us the inaugural summary of the Jesus message as he begins his proclamation of the 'good news': 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'. The 'time' that has come is the time when Satan's rule, as outlined above, is to be removed and human lives reclaimed for God. The 'repentance' (*metanoia*, literally, change of heart or mind) that is called for is not simply repentance for sin but an openness to a whole new vision of God and God's action in the world, an action that will shake prevailing structures and thinking, especially that of the scribes, to its foundations.

It is in view of this, presumably, that Jesus' summons to repentance in the Gospel is foreshadowed by the first reading featuring the similar summons of the prophet Jonah to the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-5, 10).

The Gospel goes on to describe Jesus' double calling of disciples to assist him in his mission. Two sets of brothers are summoned to cease being fishers of *fish* and become, through the following of Jesus, fishers of *people*: sharers, in other words, in his mission of reclaiming human lives for the life-giving rule of God. The double calling enables us to detect the patterns: Jesus sees and calls; they leave (nets, father, hired men) and follow. The aspect of 'leaving' is crucial: following Jesus requires the relinquishment of the strong ties of family and possessions.

The second reading, 1 Cor 7:29-31, may seem to stand apart from this, but it reflects the same sense of detachment in view of the reality of God's rule that is coming to be. A glance at the wider context shows that Paul is not counselling the abandonment of marriage or engagement with the business of the world but a refusal to be *absorbed* in such realities, when the only lasting reality is that of the coming reign of God.

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Scripture Commentary by Dianne Bergant CSA

The word of the Lord comes to Jonah with a message for Nineveh, Israel's mortal enemy. Much to the prophet's chagrin, the people of Nineveh heeded the message, believed in God, and proclaimed a fast. The incongruities of the story are striking. First and most important, God is concerned with the salvation of a nation other than Israel. Second, the city renowned for its wickedness repented of its sins as soon as it heard the proclamation. Third, the comprehensiveness of the spirit of repentance was exceeded only by its geographic breadth. All people, great and small, put on the garments of penance. Even the worst sinners can repent and be made new.

The psalm response opens with a prayer for divine guidance in one's style of life. The psalmist first asks for insight into God's saving ways, presumably in order to sing God's praises and to offer thanks for God's goodness. Covenant language – compassion and lovingkindness – is very strong in the second stanza (vv.6-7). The psalm is speaking of God's remembrance of covenant commitment and not of the psalmist's former sins. This plea that God remember may be the psalmist's way of asking for God's forgiveness. Both sinners and the humble are taught the way of the Lord, the way that God acts toward people's loyalty and infidelity. The psalmist ends with a prayer: Teach me your ways.

Paul is teaching about the endtime. Unlike the regular unfolding of time (*chrónos*), this time is of the greatest theological significance (*kairós*). It refers to decisive moments, those that mark the inbreaking of God's action. It is frequently the time of fulfilment, of divine revelation. The normal priorities of life must give way to very different behaviour, a way of living and acting that is extraordinary. Paul suggests that the *kairós* is fast approaching, but has not yet arrived. He advises the Christians to live in the present age as though it had already come. Time is running out and the world as they know it is passing away. Paul wants them to be ready for Christ's return.

The failure of Israel's monarchy prompted the people to look to the future, to a time when a king who was totally faithful to God would establish God's kingdom. Jesus inaugurates his ministry with the bold declaration: The kingdom of God is at hand! The time (*kairós*) has arrived. After this initial announcement, Jesus issues a call for repentance. Just like the prophets of old, he calls for a change of heart, a return to God. Jesus then calls the fishermen Simon, Andrew, James and John. He summons them to follow him, to cast their nets and together gather up other followers. The abruptness with which they respond to him is an indication of the radical nature of life in the kingdom of God. © Dianne Bergant CSA

Homily by Richard Leonard SJ

Seeing today's Gospel is set by the water's edge, this story seems appropriate.

One day, three men were hiking and unexpectedly came upon a large raging river. They needed to get to the other side, but had no idea of how to do so. The first man prayed to God, 'Please God, give me the strength to cross this river.' In an instant God gave him big arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours, after almost drowning a couple of times.

Seeing this, the second man prayed to God, 'Please God, give me the strength and the resources to cross this river.' In an instant God gave him a rowboat and he was able to row across the river in about an hour, after almost capsizing the boat a couple of times.

The third man had seen how this worked out for the other two, so he also prayed to God saying, 'Please God, give me the strength and the resources ... and the intelligence ... to cross this river.' In an instant God turned him into a woman. She looked at the map, went upstream a couple of hundred metres, then walked across the bridge!

The three men's prayers were all about gaining something: strength, resources and intelligence. Today's readings are about gaining things too. Unlike the instant answer to the hikers' prayers, Jonah, Paul and Mark know real gain usually comes less dramatically and quickly, and involves letting go of something as much as it involves taking it on. In the Christian life this is called conversion, and it's at the centre of our life of faith.

Christian conversion is not a once-in-a-lifetime moment. It can happen every day in a rich variety of ways. It involves a change in attitude as much as a change in lifestyle.

All three readings show a different facet of conversion. Jonah calls the Ninevites to social conversion. St Paul, who reveals a very strong expectation that the end of time is near, calls the people of Corinth to a conversion of mind. And through relating the call of Simon, Andrew, James and John, St Mark tells us about personal conversion.

These days we regularly hear God's call in personal terms. It's sometimes called 'me and God' theology. Modern hymns reflect it best. We regularly sing about how Jesus died 'for me', or that 'here I am Lord' or that 'I will follow you'. Individually these lines are all true, the problem is that they tend to play down the more ancient and biblical social dimensions of our call to conversion. In the Bible even though God and Jesus call people to conversion through personal relationships, there is no hint that this is where it stops. Every call leads to the wider community, to the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and out to the entire world in the New Testament.

Today's readings provide a litmus test for our conversion. If our faith has become a self-help club, where we talk about 'my' God, 'my' prayers, 'my' Church, 'my' Mass, we are in need of conversion. We don't need to leave God's personal love for us behind, we just need to see it as a necessary preparation for belonging to the

people of God as we engage with the world at every level. We are challenged to reject the idea that it's me-and-God-against-the-world, and welcome in the idea that it's US-and-God-IN-the-world.

May this Eucharist give us the strength, resources and intelligence we need to be converted personally and socially again this Sunday.

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Reflection

by Dianne Bergant CSA

Today we reflect on the first and most important responsibility of discipleship, namely, evangelisation, the goal of which is the proclamation of the reign of God. God seems to choose the most unlikely people to preach to others. It does not matter who *brings* the good news, but who *receives* it. Jonah the prophet was sent to outsiders, even enemies. The disciples were fishermen who spoke to the people of their own country. God's salvation is intended for all, and it seems to make little difference who brings this good news.

Today's readings call for repentance. The grace of God requires a new way of living, a life of faith and commitment. The gospel invites us into the age of fulfilment, a salvific reign of truth, compassion and kindness. It is a way of life that leads to justice.

There is an urgency in these readings. This world in its present form is passing away, and God's call demands a total response. Like the disciples, we must leave the familiarity of our former ways and follow the call that we have heard in the depths of our hearts. We are called first to enter the reign of God and then to spread it. As ambassadors of God, we bring the good news of salvation wherever we are and in whatever we do. Called by God, we now begin to live in a totally different way, guided by the values of the reign of God rather than those of the world that is passing away.

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