

EPIPHANY III 24 January 2021

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White in St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

Jonah 3.1-5, 10; Psalm 62.6-14; I Corinthians 7.29-31; Mark 1.14-20

'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.'

Our readings on this morning are a sobering reminder that within a couple of weeks of concluding the festivities of this past Christmastide we are within only a couple of weeks of Ash Wednesday and Lent --the season of prayer, self-reflection, and abstinence. And our readings today prepare us to hear once more the Lenten summons to Repentance --in New Testament Greek, *metanoia*, 'turning again', 'trying once more', 'changing'.

Our first reading is from the Book of Jonah, a wonderfully comic story told for very serious reasons. Jonah is the only Hebrew prophet ever sent specifically to Gentiles -- non-Jews -- and God sends him to Nineveh, an Assyrian city of power, wealth, and arrogance whose people have nothing to do with the God of Israel and who are enemies of the Jews. Jonah despises the inhabitants of Nineveh, and rather than go and warn them, he prefers instead to sail to the far side of the Mediterranean where he hopes God will not notice him.

It is a silly plan, and as soon as Jonah's ship has left the dock God sends a storm so violent that Jonah needs to ask the crew to toss him overboard because he is the cause of their peril. A great fish then swallows him, and after three days spews him out back on the land where he started. God again orders him to Nineveh, and chastened but still testy, Jonah goes to the center of the city where, as we have just heard, he proclaims that God will soon destroy the sinful place.

To Jonah's horror, the Gentiles of Nineveh suddenly heed the call to change. They begin a penitential fast, and put sackcloth on not only themselves but also on their cattle (a curious idea ...). God then also repents of God's plan to destroy the city and so needs to challenge Jonah's rage by pointing out that the Assyrians are God's creatures even as are the Jews, and that God may have mercy on any of God's creatures, especially if they choose to change.

We learn several things in this boisterous story: that God's forgiveness is available to everyone; that God's messengers the prophets can be cranky and usually reluctant; and that they do not necessarily need to agree with God's purposes in order to proclaim effectively God's call to turn around and begin again.

Today we also hear St Mark's version of the call of Jesus's first disciples --Andrew and his brother Peter, James and his brother John, all of them pretty ordinary fishermen. Jesus tells them that he will soon have them fishing for people, and when he

does send his disciples out on their own he will tell them to proclaim what St Mark calls simply 'the message', which has echoes of the message given to Jonah: the kingdom of God has come near, repent --turn again, change-- believe the good news, and rejoice.

And in this story we learn that God's messengers the apostles are not necessarily dramatically different from ourselves --are not better educated, nor better dressed, nor more articulate-- and they need not fully understand the vastness of what they are to proclaim, for Jesus' disciples obviously struggle to comprehend who he is and what he is saying. They are, however, willing to believe a message that they perceive is bigger than anything they can really know: God is near, think again and rejoice.

Which brings us to that woolly passage from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We can only make sense of it if we know what Paul has written both before and after the tiny bit that we have heard. Paul believes that God is soon going to overturn the world as it is --'the time has grown short'-- and that, in preparation for this, married people are at a disadvantage because they are too involved with one another and so not involved enough in their own repentance. Paul wants to spare the Corinthians who are not yet married these anxieties, and he urges them to avoid marriage. He also tells those who are married to live as though they are not.

Paul has a grim view of marriage, and here the apostle who can write so movingly about God's incarnation in the human being Jesus --'he emptied himself ... being born in human likeness ... and became obedient to the point of death', and will 'transform our bodies so that they may be conformed to the body of his glory' [*Philip. 3.21*] --this same Paul can be blind to the glimpses of Divinity found in the love and concern between spouses, indeed in the love and care between friends and neighbors. Paul has blind spots, and yet the same apostle who writes to the Corinthians also tells the Galatians, 'Through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. [*Gal.m4. 13-14*] Like any of the rest of us, Paul is inconsistent.

And so from St Paul we learn that God's human messengers do not always 'get' the whole of the message, and that when they try to elaborate on it, giving instruction to others, they can become distracted by their own idiosyncrasies. Which is why Paul (wisely) needs elsewhere to write, 'Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; [and] hold fast to that which is good'. [*1 Thess. 5.21*] The standard by which we are to measure everything that we hear from any messenger is that Summary of the Law: love God, love your neighbor: love.

All of which brings us back to what St Mark calls just 'the message': God is near: repent --try again-- and believe and rejoice. You see, the God who at Christmas takes on human flesh chooses mostly to speak in this world in human voices. They may be irascible, petulant, and unwilling, like Jonah's; they may sound so ordinary or even simple as to be easily ignored; they may discomfit our druthers and challenge our

sureties; but when we test them we may be surprised by how many of them really are about ... the message --God is near: repent, think again, believe ... and rejoice.

'I will make you fish for people'. And, if someone is fishing for us, we may very well be caught Amen.