

HOMILY - 3RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME "B" 1-21-2018

I hope that what I am going to say does not sound sacrilegious. But I can't help questioning sometimes God's skill in choosing his leaders. A case in point is the Prophet Jonah who we hear about in the first reading today.

From the very beginning, Jonah was at best a reluctant prophet. Most people know very little about Jonah, except perhaps that he fell off a ship into the sea and was swallowed by a whale, and after surviving this ordeal for three days, was coughed up onto the shore. But there is much more to the story of Jonah and an important message we can learn from his adventures.

God had called Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and preach repentance to the people. This did not sit well with Jonah. He, like most Israelites, hated the Assyrians because they had destroyed Samaria a few hundred years previously and had taken the people of the ten northern tribes into exile, where they were never heard from again. Jews were taught from a young age to hate the Assyrians and could not see how they could be worthy of God's mercy.

Being a faithful and loyal Jew, Jonah rebels against God's call. Instead of going to Nineveh, he boards a ship and goes in an opposite direction. While on the ship, a horrific storm blows in and the crew acted on its superstition and threw lots to see who was responsible for the storm. The lot falls on Jonah and he is thrown over the side of the ship; he is swallowed by a big fish and after three days he is spewed onto the shore. There God tells him to return and go to Nineveh and call it to repentance.

Under protest he returns and preaches repentance as he was told to do. He warns the people of gloom and doom and to his surprise his warning moves the people to repentance. Everyone from the king to the least citizen, and even the animals repent in sackcloth and ashes. In response God has mercy on them, and withdraws his threat of disaster.

What is very significant to this whole story is Jonah's response. He is so angry and filled with hatred for the Assyrians, he asks God to take his life away. He would rather die than be remembered as the prophet who brought God's blessing to the Assyrians. God replies to Jonah's displeasure: "Have you reason to be angry? Should I not be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot distinguish their right hand from their left, not to mention the many cattle?"

The author of the Book of Jonah seems to be laughing at the self-satisfied arrogance and narrow prejudices of his fellow-Jews toward other nations and tribes - prejudices that are even shared by people in leadership positions such as Jonah. In this sense the author of this book is addressing the issue of prejudice against foreigners and foreign nations. It would be safe to say it was written to condemn the sin of intolerance and the arrogance of one nation's looking down upon another.

What might we walk away with after this reflection on Jonah? I think one message we might be hearing is that we should never believe that God hates our enemies as we do. This book reveals once and for all whose side God is on. It insists that God is on all sides - God does not take sides in the numerous divisions and conflicts that so often divide humanity.

God is always above any of the divisions or conflicts that divide us. Whether it be color, ethnicity, religious preference, politics, immigration status or sexual identity - God simply sees all people as God's children, made in his own image and likeness. God always prefers peace to war, life to death, and mercy over vengeance. There is no doubt we live in a complicated and often divided world. But in the midst of this struggle, we would do well to remember the words of Jesus: "Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God."

This book of Jonah reminds us of the spiritual emptiness of those who pride themselves on being God's people when the gap between the rich and the poor is growing, and the manufacture and stockpiling of armaments continues to be the world's biggest industry. The Book of Jonah is a story about a people who prided themselves on being "God's people" - but the same God preferred to send his prophet to a nation who were their enemies, where he found hearts that were willing to change.

Closing Story 1-21-18

There were two little boys ages 5 and 7, mischievous kids, not yours, but very mischievous kids. They were getting in trouble all over the neighborhood and so if anything went wrong they were blamed for it. So the mother had had enough of it. She heard that there was a preacher in the community that was very successful in disciplining children so she asked if he would speak to her boys. The preacher agreed that he would do it individually. So the mother sent the 5-year-old in the morning and the older boy was to see the preacher in the afternoon.

The preacher was a huge man with a deep booming voice and he sat the younger boy down and he said to him very sternly, "Do you know where God is?" The boy's mouth dropped open but he made no response, sitting there wide-eyed and his mouth hanging open. So the preacher repeated the question in an even sterner voice. "Where is God?" And the boy made no attempt to answer. The preacher raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's face and yelled "**Where is God?**" The boy screamed and bolted out of the room, ran directly home and dove into his closet, slamming the door behind him. His older brother found him in the closet and asked, "What happened?" and the younger brother gasping for breath replied, "We are in big trouble this time. God is missing and they think we took him!"