

## We are called to undergo repentance

January 21 2018 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

The first reading--Jonah, although it is short,  
and read only once in church, during the three year cycle, it is an extraordinary book.  
It was written at a time when the Hebrew people were becoming a little too full of themselves.  
Yes they were the chosen people,  
and yes God was working through them,  
but the book was written, and included in the Hebrews scriptures,  
to help the Hebrew people understand that God was also present in other people.  
It was probably written after the Babylonian exile, but set before the exile.  
And think about the story—Nineveh was a large city, the capital of the Assyrians—  
the very people who destroyed Israel—their mortal enemies...  
therefore the very symbol of evil.  
So the main character, Jonah, and probably every good Jew who read the book,  
would be upset that the Ninevites repented at Jonah's preaching.  
They would have preferred that God destroy the whole city.

This is an indication that God's ways are not our ways.  
God does not want the death of sinners—he wants them to undergo conversion and live.  
I ask you to take a moment to think about this. Which is a true example of love?  
Wanting the destruction of someone—even your mortal enemy.  
Or wanting the salvation of all people...even your mortal enemy?  
Most of us find it extremely difficult getting past our prejudices and hatred.  
We find it difficult to be merciful.  
It is actually an expression of divine mercy—  
that God does not resign himself to letting sinners go blindly to their doom.  
On the contrary he tries everything in his power  
to get all people to repent and enter into eternal life...  
even to the point of allowing his son to die a horrible death on the cross.

Story of Jonah, is the story of the Prodigal son. The only thing different are the characters.  
The Ninevites, like the younger son repent...they seek out the mercy of God, the Father.  
Jonah, like the older son, is bitter,  
he does not want the father to be merciful to the Ninevites, the younger son,  
on the contrary he wants the father to destroy them.

I love the irony in the story of Jonah.  
Not only is the story a painful reminder that God did not punish the mortal enemies of Israel,  
Not only is it a constant reminder that God wants the salvation of all people.  
But it is also a reminder that the chosen people did not repent when the prophets preached to them.  
Remember this story was written after the Babylonian exile, but set before the exile.  
Before the exile all kinds of prophets were sent to Israel with the message—  
“If you do not shape up, something terrible is going to happen.”  
It is basically the same message that Jonah preached to the Ninevites.

But the difference is the Ninevites heard the message,  
and everyone of them put on sackcloth, and underwent repentance.  
When the people in the Holy land heard the message of the prophets,  
they did not put on sackcloth and they did not undergo repentance.  
It is no wonder they were punished and the Ninevites were spared.  
The Ninevites heard and repented and Nineveh was spared.

Skip ahead a few hundred years...Jesus...the very mouthpiece of God  
appears in the Holy land proclaiming,  
“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;  
repent and believe the good news.”  
The people who heard this message had the same choice,  
as the Hebrew people before the exile,  
Believe the good news and repent, or disregard the good news and be punished.  
And we know what happened to them, they did not repent and they were sent into exile.  
The people of Nineveh were given the same choice,  
Believe the good news and repent, or disregard the good news and be punished,  
and we know what happened to them.  
They underwent repentance and were spared.  
When Jesus came on the scene, the people were given the same choice,  
Believe the good news and repent, or disregard the good news and be punished.  
We know that some of them heeded the message, become disciples  
and changed the world we live in.  
We also know that others did not heed the message,  
and they treated Jesus like they treated all the prophets before him,  
with contempt, and eventually they hung him on the cross.

Now all of this is fine and dandy, but what does it have to do with us.  
There is a tremendous wisdom in putting these readings at the beginning of a new year.  
We are three weeks into the new year:  
1) By now 98% of all New Years resolutions have been forgotten.  
2) The Christmas season has been packed away for another year,  
and 3) Life is getting back to normal.

The Church in its wisdom gives us a set of readings which challenges us on what “Normal” is.

John the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord, but he has been arrested.  
His ministry has ended. And just as his ministry ended—Jesus comes on the scene.  
The torch has been passed and a new era of human history has begun.  
Today that new era has been passed down to us.  
Today we are given that same choice,  
Believe the good news and repent, or disregard the good news and be punished.  
What will our choice be?

The second reading is a very interesting reading.  
St. Paul reminds us that we are living in the end times (pause)  
and that Jesus Christ will come again in all his glory.

When Jesus comes, all will be changed:

- 1) There will be no need of marriage, as we will all be one,
- 2) There will be no mourning, as we will all be filled with eternal joy.
- 3) There will be no moments of rejoicing as we will be rejoicing all the time.
- 4) There will be no need to buy anything, or do business,  
as Christ will provide for all our needs.

Now Paul could have said,

“When this happens all will be changed, and when it does we will be living very differently.

But Paul’s message is not future orientated. His message is for the here and now.

“What should we do today?”

What Paul is suggesting is that we begin living, today,

in such a way,

that the way we are living

will be the same as the way we will be living when Christ comes again,

and in that way,

when he comes again we will not have to change.

Meaning we will not need to undergo repentance at the end of time,

because we will already have undergone repentance.

I suspect that this is why Simon and Andrew, James and John, followed Jesus.

They saw in Jesus something that was different,

something that could lead the world out of chaos and turmoil,

and they wanted to be a part of it.

Are we prepared to do the same?