

3B Conventual 2024

Jonah

Pope Francis has instituted today as the **Sunday of the Word of God**, so today we particularly take God's Word to heart. St Benedict speaks for every Christian in saying that "we set out in life with the Gospel for our guide, and "what page or passage of the Old or New Testament is not the truest guide to human life."

In the Gospel today, Peter, Andrew, James and John respond quickly to the call of Jesus. "Follow me" he says, and they do. How can the Lord build his kingdom without those willing to follow? Many of us though, may feel a little more like Jonah, a bit more "ummm, maybe." A little less prompt and ready.

I love the **Book of Jonah** – it is one of my favourites in the Old Testament. It does have the advantage of being a book of only two pages, and Jonah himself a prophet of only one short line. It is also the most **Christian** of stories. Jonah is the only prophet with whom our Lord explicitly identifies himself, and to whom he refers explicitly by name. It is well worth picking up and reading. It is written as a comic tale.

Because "Up!" says the Lord. "Go to Nineveh the great city and preach." And what does Jonah do? He *Upped*, alright, but fled in the **opposite direction**. The Lord says "Go to Nineveh," he takes the first boat to Tarshish, which some recon to be in the south of Spain.

We all know the story of Jonah, of how he ends up in the **belly of a whale**. God has strange ways of getting our intention. The passage we heard today is the moment after he has been coughed up by the whale on the shore of the sea. God gives him a **second chance**. I think God considers us like cats, and gives us each at least nine lives, endless opportunities to turn around, respond or repent – as Jesus puts it in the Gospel. "Repent and believe the Gospel" Good News, because it is good news.

Up, Go to Nineveh says the Lord God. This time Jonah responds and sets out in obedience to the Word of God. He journeys into the city and preaches his one line "Only forty more days and Nineveh is going to be destroyed." But unlike Jonah the people are good listeners and respond. They put on sackcloth and ashes. God relents, and everyone is happy. Except for Jonah. But why?

We have to remember how awful Nineveh sounded in the ears of ancient people. It was capital of a empire brutal towards its enemies. No wonder Jonah wanted to flee to the Costa del Sol. But what is remarkable about the Book of Jonah is its concern for the foreigner. It is **universal** in its outlook, like the Gospels in tone.

All the **characters** in the story are likeable. The pagan sailors, the Assyrian King, the people (who give the best example of obedient response to God's word). and even the animals (who in a comic touch put on sackcloth and ashes). They readily respond to the Word of God. They are a model to their Jewish neighbours. Just like in the story of the Good Samaritan, the stranger, the foreigner, the immigrant is someone who I can learn from.

But this good behaviour of the Ninevites leaves Jonah unhappy. At the end of the story we find him sitting under the Castor Oil plant which he loved. He is **sulking**, because there he was a **prophet**, preaching gloom and doom, but God showed he wasn't like that. He didn't bring about the threatened disaster because that is not God's way. He not only gives Jonah a second chance. He gives a second chance to the Ninevites too. Jonah is the King of the sulk, emotional strike action. As you know, a sulk can last anywhere between seven minutes and seven years.

All the characters in the story are likeable, that is, except for Jonah, the **only Israelite**, and he is a **prophet** of Israel as well. He is resentful, obstinate and bad-tempered. It is wonderful that the Jewish author of this Book was able to see the good in the foreigner at the expense of his own prophet. The narrow-mindedness and the religious prejudice of people like Jonah is gently mocked.

This little lesson gives the Book its final comic twist. A lesson of humility and sincere repentance comes to the Chosen People from **their bitterest foes**, the Assyrians.

And this has something to say to all of us. Maybe my **enemy** has something to teach me. Or to put it less strongly, maybe the person who does things differently, sees and experiences things differently to me has something to teach me. If someone disagrees with me I needn't see it as a threat but as a gift to enrich me. I needn't sulk like Jonah.

An important lesson, perhaps in this week of prayer for Christian unity that the best way forward is for us all to **humbly learn** from each other. We should sometimes laugh at our own silly ways, our own pomposity, and be open to recognize the good that we find elsewhere. Not just for Christians fumbling their way to unity, but everyone in life.

The Israelites can laugh at their comic hero Jonah and thank God for the Ninevites. Good for them. And when we can laugh at ourselves and thank God for all the people that see things differently and enrich our own vision, then good for us.

The Book of Jonah is a **parable of mercy**, its about God's compassion to a city. The American poet Robert Frost said it was **the first book in history** whose theme is entirely mercy. This is what Jonah resents at the end of the story. It is like "I knew you were going to forgive them!" "I knew it!" Sulk.

What we learn from the Book of Jonah is that God is a good God. We can sometimes be a bit stupid. But God is a good God, a God of second chances. So when the Lord speaks to us in his word today and says: *Repent*, change your mind, turn your heart towards the Kingdom, the only question is whether we will take up the offer.

To come back to the big question of the Gospel. To where or to whom are we being called? To what situation is Jesus calling us that needs our kindness, our compassion our mercy? His good word. His Gospel. How is God getting our attention and calling us out of our comfort zones?