

3rd Sunday, Year B: Vocation (2): What matters most: person or message?

1st Reading: Jonah 3:1-5+10: 2nd time, Jonah's message actually works!

2nd Reading: 1Cor 7:29-31: Paul's sense of urgency; but how realistic is he?

Gospel: Mark 1:14-20: Andrew, Simon, James & John become disciples.

In some ways, this Sunday's Mass readings repeat last week's, with the theme of vocation. The difference is that this weekend, we are told the content of what preachers had to say to people. It can be summed up simply: 'Repent, and believe this message!' The word "repent" does not just mean "be sorry for your sins", or "do penance & good works" (as we tend to use the word today). It had the sense of "turn your life round completely"; "make a fresh start", "do a U-turn" (like politicians, after major errors) – that sort of thing.

So, when told to "repent", people cannot just make a snap decision to say "Oops! Sorry!"; they are asked to think hard about their lives, then decide where they go next. This needs some serious time & prayer. The first reading tells of the prophet Jonah and his message to the people of Nineveh. I do not wish to shock you when I say that many feel the story to be fictitious – a parable of how God's Word (or 'grace') overcomes the reluctance and faults of those ordained to preach it. You may remember that Jonah at first refused to go; he ran away to sea; the ship nearly sank - until Jonah was thrown overboard; he was swallowed by a sea-monster, which (rather conveniently) vomited him safely back on to a beach. Second time round, he agreed to go – and was a great success – or at least, God's word was. The people accepted their need to 'repent' – and did so, from the King downwards. However, the author has no time for Jonah: he comes across as miserable and selfish (rather like the Victor Meldrew character in *One Foot in the Grave*.) What mattered was that God's message was preached, and his 'grace' did the rest.

I suggest that all three readings are linked by a sense of urgency – something that many feel in these difficult times, especially if they are caught up in the wars going on in Ukraine, Gaza - and latest tension in the Persian Gulf. Those who are suffering terribly are desperate for some solution. Jonah warns the people: "*Only 40 days more*"; St Paul writes: "*Brothers, our time is growing short*"; Jesus says: "*The time has come; the Kingdom of God is close at hand*". There is a stress on timing in all 3 passages; the problem is that many people in our society today cannot feel the same urgency about spiritual matters that they feel about their financial or health issues. In particular, St Paul's idea that we should live as if... we were unmarried, or had nothing to mourn for, or were not

enjoying life, or not being in business, etc, rings hollow with most. They argue that his teaching is unrealistic, making religion seem irrelevant to modern life.

I can sympathise with that – up to a point. When Paul wrote that letter, it was fairly early in his ministry, when it was believed that the “end of the world” would arrive at any moment. His later writings show a different style, in which he realises that we are in for the long haul, so we have to get on with a normal life, and make our faith relevant to what we have to do. This is not an attempt to water the faith down; it is a simple acceptance that the end of the world is a very long way off, and so, in the meantime, we must relate what we believe about Jesus to how we conduct our lives. For instance, this year, there will be a general election here, and a presidential one in the USA. As Christians. It is important that we allow our faith to affect how we vote, because there can be a real difference in the way each country is run. I would never want to suggest how adults should vote; merely that we ought to consider carefully what we do.

But to return to these readings: I think that we must separate the essence of any message from our feelings about the person who delivers it. For example, St Paul has a bad ‘image’ these days because of his views about women’s roles in church communities. But how he thought was common 2000 years ago, right up to the early 20th century. His insights about our faith in Jesus are the very basis of Christianity. (Churchill had some very out-of-date views about industry and the British Empire - especially India, where his views would now be considered ‘racist’ - but he was an inspired war leader against the Nazis.) The disciples were told by Jesus to become ‘fishers of men (and women!)’; this would mean hard work, and the risk of unpopularity. St Paul discovered that last problem, during his various missionary journeys.

To put this into our modern context, what the preacher, teacher, priest, deacon, (or other church worker) must have is a good name, and reliability, because these go with the job. (Hence my personal horror at clerical scandals in recent decades.) There is no way in which anyone working for any church could copy the popularity of TV personalities, but we should be respected for a life-style that matches the gospel we teach. All of us whom Jesus uses in his work are weak human beings; therefore, no matter what our feelings might be, we must accept that the gospel message – along with people’s faith in Jesus and his Church - matter more than we do. That was the message of the Jonah story and the experience of St Paul. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

