

Homily for 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B (24th January 2021)

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Ps 24; 1 Cor 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Theme: Repent and Believe the Good News

On 30th September 2019, the 600th anniversary of St. Jerome's death, Pope Francis in his *Motu Proprio Aperuit Illis*, instituted the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, the 'Sunday of the Word of God.' It is a day to reflect on the centrality of God's Word in the life of the Church and the world. Today's readings challenge us to repent and welcome the Good News, the Word of God.

The first reading is from the book of the prophet Jonah. The reference to 'Jonah, the son of Amittai' in the second book of the Kings (14:25) may situate the prophet's life between 782 and 753 BCE during the reign of king Jeroboam II. Jonah was an Israelite sent by God to preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh. The book of Jonah does not have the usual prophetic oracles. His message to the people of Nineveh is contained only in one verse, 'Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed' (Jonah 3:4). God sent Jonah to go and preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. He earlier refused and ran away from God to Tarshish (Joh 1:1-16). But after his three-day experience inside the great fish (Joh 2), Jonah accepted to go to Nineveh, a non-Jewish city, which was the capital of the Assyrian empire. Nineveh was described as an evil city. Nevertheless, the book shows that God's loving-kindness extends to every human being and people.

In our reading, Jonah, on this second occasion, accepted the message to go to Nineveh. He preached a whole day saying, 'only forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed.' The people received the message, 'proclaimed a fast and put-on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least.' The king took the lead. The message had the desired effect, repentance. God knew the people would repent and never intended to destroy Nineveh, which was why he sent Jonah. God's intention is always that his people repent and be saved.

The Psalmist highlights that the people needed someone to remind them of the way of the Lord. The prophet Jonah's message was to teach the people to walk in truth and return to the Lord. Because the Lord is good and upright and shows the path to those, who stray, he remembered and showed his mercy to the people of Nineveh out of his steadfast loving kindness.

Jesus begins his ministry with the same call to repentance, 'Repent, and believe the Good News (*euaggelion*).' The prophet Isaiah had foretold the coming of the one who brings the good news (*euaggelion*) (Isa 52:7; Nah 1:15). Jesus fulfils that prophecy by saying that the spirit of the Lord has anointed him to bring 'good news' to the afflicted (Isa 61:1-2). The words of Jesus to repent and believe the good news refer to the Old Testament's prophecies' fulfilment. Jesus is the Good News, the Word of God. The content of the Good News's proclamation is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 2:22-24; 1 Cor 15:3-4, 14; 2 Tim 2:8). Seen in this way, we can understand that Jesus is saying, 'Repent and believe in me' (cf. Jn 10:25,38; 11:26; 14:1; 17:20). Jesus then calls his first disciples to follow him and to share in the work of bringing the Good News to the whole world. They are to be part of the recruitment of more people for the kingdom of God. Those he called, followed him without hesitation, leaving their professions and families.

St. Paul, in the second reading, tells the Corinthians that the time is growing short. There is an urgency to the message of believing the good news. Human beings are not in control of their lives and cannot determine the length of their lives. For this reason, Paul tells the Corinthians to live their lives with a focus on God, who is in control of time and events. Those enjoying life should beware for 'the world as we know it is passing away.' It is good to enjoy life but with a consciousness that our end is more important than the present.

On this Sunday of the word of God, the reaction of the people of Nineveh invites us to have an attitude of repentance and reconcile with God. Simultaneously, the call to follow Jesus and be part of disseminating the message of God's kingdom is imperative for every Christian. We do not need to be ordained ministers or have unique roles in preaching the good news. Our different states of life, be it family, single or religious, and our respective professions are fertile grounds for living out and preaching the Christian message. Our exemplary life should speak more than words.