

[Jonah 3:1-05; Psalm 25; 1 Cor. 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20]

Comparisons between Jesus and Jonah go back a long way. One might say that Jesus started it. One day the Pharisees came to him insisting on proof of his authority. Jesus was so angered by this demand -- weren't his teachings and miracles proof enough? -- that he declared the only sign this evil generation would get is the sign of Jonah. It was a remarkable statement. And in order to appreciate just how remarkable, let's go back to the story of Jonah itself, to see why Jesus took the sign of Jonah for his own.

From childhood on, we remember Jonah because of the colorful fish tale at the heart of his story. The prophet spent three days in the belly of a fish, represented in most kiddie Bibles as a whale. What we understand, linking this vivid memory to the Gospels, is that Jonah's three-day sojourn in the body of the fish parallels the three days Jesus spent in the darkness of the tomb. Both men were swallowed whole, and by the grace of God, liberated on the third day.

So the sign of Jonah is resurrection, we say. Therefore, Jesus does what He does by the authority of his Resurrection to come. This is God's sign that Jesus is who He says He is, the beloved Son of his Father. But when we focus only on the fish story in Jonah, we miss the fact that, as scholar John McKenzie points out, the book has more wonders than this. The story is nothing *but* wonders: the storm that stops when Jonah is ejected from the boat. The fish that regurgitates him whole. The plant that grows up in a single day to shield him from the sun. Some scholars would say these are all parables. But the greatest amazement is the wholesale conversion of Nineveh. The fate of Nineveh, in fact, is central to the book's purpose. Nineveh repents, and God spares the city. And Jonah, good Israelite that he is, can't bear it.

To appreciate this, we have to consider what Nineveh, capital of Assyria (now Iran), might mean to a citizen of Israel. To get the picture, all we have to do is read the Old Testament book of Nahum. Nineveh was hated because Assyria, as an empire, was successful. They trespassed against Israel throughout their common history.

In 722 B.C., most significantly, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, Samaria, fell to Assyria, sealing the nation's fate. There was no love lost between the people of Nineveh and the children of Abraham.

More to the point, we might consider who our enemies are, and how we might feel about their destruction. Are there countries, governments, groups, or private individuals we would like to see "smited"? Do we think God agrees with us and would like to smite them, too? There you have Nineveh; for though she was destroyed in 612 B.C. by Babylon, she, too, seems to enjoy a mysterious resurrection in every age.

Jonah is hardly Jesus. When he hears God's call to prophesy to Nineveh, he jumps on a ship to Tarshish. Nineveh is east; Tarshish is far, far west. We get the picture: Jonah will go to the ends of the earth to avoid God's will being done. Verses missing from today's First Reading say that God's Word has to come to Jonah a SECOND TIME. How many times does God's Word come to us before we have ears to listen and a heart to respond?

But the fish, at least, serves God well, and Jonah is spat upon the shore he despises. Nineveh takes three days to cross, but Jonah walks only one day, announcing the city's fate. Compare his gloomy phrase: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed" with the urgent and hopeful words of Jesus: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news!" Do we proclaim the Good News, or do we run away from it?

The miracle occurs: The city of Nineveh, from the king to the beasts in the field, repents its evil ways. Citizens and animals take up sackcloth and fasting. It's enough to impress God, who declines to carry out the threat of annihilation.

In the story of Jonah, Nineveh gets 40 days to consider which way to go: pursue their present course of destruction, or turn and possibly be saved.

Down to the last cow in that great Assyrian city, the choice is made to repent and throw their nation on the mercy of God. That's a good bet -- if you believe that God's mercy is greater than all of human sinfulness. And it is.

The process of conversion is not simple or convenient, but it is necessary for Christian discipleship. Jonah wouldn't turn, so he got turned around by a Higher Power, but his heart wasn't in it. Jonah drags his feet through Nineveh with his message of mass destruction. His story is ours. We face Jonah's question: Will we turn our lives around while there's still time to do so? Conversion isn't easy, but it is possible, and the opportunities to make a U-turn come regularly. "This is the time of fulfillment. Repent and believe. Follow me."

St. Paul tells us that this world is passing away -- for some of us sooner than we suspect. God's ways are many: sometimes sudden, sometimes gradual, but all lead to joy and salvation. The trouble is, we never know the day or the hour, so are we willing to take the chance that we still have time to weigh the odds of personal or corporate extinction? Are we going to let yet another invitation to follow Jesus slip past us? Because time does foreclose eventually. He speaks of "Kairos," that moment in time when things happen, like the Kingdom is here already, versus "chronos," the measurable time line which goes from now into infinity. Christ is here already to inspire our words and actions.

Monday/Tomorrow we have the opportunity to make another choice: It's the annual day of prayer and penance for life. We Catholics are asked to do what we can to acknowledge the gross violation of human dignity that legal abortions uphold. Some will pray, others do penance, some will do both. What is life worth to us? What are we willing to sacrifice to uphold its sacred character?

Fifty years ago, Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston wrote about the Church's need for courage. He said: If all the sleeping folks will wake up, and all the lukewarm folks will fire up, and all the disgruntled folks will sweeten up, and all the discouraged folks will cheer up, and all the depressed folks will look up, and all the estranged folks will make up, and all the gossiping folks will shut up, and all the dry bones will shake up, and all the true soldiers will stand up, and all the church members will pray up, and if the Savior of all will be lifted up . . . then we can have the greatest renewal this world has ever known. AMEN!