

Fr. Michael Sparough, SJ's Homily - Reconcile with your Enemies

1st Reading - Jonah 3:1-10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

"Set out for the great city of Nineveh,
and announce to it the message that I will tell you."

So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh,
according to the LORD's bidding.

Now Nineveh was an enormously large city;
it took three days to go through it.

Jonah began his journey through the city,
and had gone but a single day's walk announcing,
"Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,"
when the people of Nineveh believed God;
they proclaimed a fast
and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh,
he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe,
covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes.

Then he had this proclaimed throughout Nineveh,
by decree of the king and his nobles:

"Neither man nor beast, neither cattle nor sheep,
shall taste anything;

they shall not eat, nor shall they drink water.

Man and beast shall be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God;

every man shall turn from his evil way

and from the violence he has in hand.

Who knows, God may relent and forgive, and withhold his blazing wrath,
so that we shall not perish."

When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way,

he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them;

he did not carry it out.

Gospel - Luke 11:29-32

While still more people gathered in the crowd, Jesus said to them,

"This generation is an evil generation;

it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it,

except the sign of Jonah.

Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites,

so will the Son of Man be to this generation.

At the judgment

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the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation
and she will condemn them,
because she came from the ends of the earth
to hear the wisdom of Solomon,
and there is something greater than Solomon here.
At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation
and condemn it,
because at the preaching of Jonah they repented,
and there is something greater than Jonah here.”

Homily - *Reconcile with your Enemies*

I hope you've noticed by now that in all of the readings throughout Lent, there is a thematic parity. There's always a connection between the first reading and the Gospel. That is not always true throughout the liturgical year but it is true the seasons of Advent and Lent. Nowhere is that more in evidence than in today's readings.

I love when there's a Gospel that has Jesus directly referring to something in the Old Testament which were, of course, his Scriptures and he knew them backwards and forwards--better than any scribe or Pharisee. That's the case today where in the Gospel, Jesus refers to our first reading--the story of Jonah. This is a fairly familiar story, I suspect for most of us, but some of the details of the story may not be clear. What's important to realize is that Jonah was a reluctant prophet. He didn't want to do what God wanted him to do. Can you identify with that? I certainly can.

Jonah knew that the Lord was calling him to call the Ninevites to conversion. Part of the reason why he didn't want to do that was the Ninevites were his political enemies. They had tried to destroy his nation. Can you imagine God putting it on your heart saying, "I want you to go over to Syria and pray for their conversion. I want you to go over to North Korea and call those people to conversion. Or, think of your dearest enemy or your worst enemy, can you imagine the Lord calling you to go over and to say, "I want to be reconciled with you.?"

And so John resisted. He didn't want to do that but eventually God's call was overwhelming to him and he gave in and he went to the Ninevites and surprise, surprise, surprise, they believed him and they repented. That's what Jesus is referring to and he compares himself very directly to Jonah and he said, "The Ninevites converted when Jonah there enemy called them to conversion. They believed in God's call to repentance and they converted, but you are not paying any attention to me and there will be a day of judgment and it is not going to go well with you because you are ignoring what I have to say."

He uses another analogy in the Gospel of the Queen of Sheba coming from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. She was very impressed. She went way out of her way, way out of her comfort zone, to hear the stories of this fabled king who had great wisdom. She came away very impressed. Again, Jesus compares himself very directly to Solomon and says, "You

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have something greater than Solomon here. If you just listen, you can hear the Scribes and the Pharisees murmuring among themselves, closing their hearts, rolling their eyes, saying, "Who does this guy think he is? Where does he get off?"

We have to let go of our own prejudices to hear the word of God being proclaimed to us in our own time. Sometimes we hear God's word from very unlikely sources and we resist that. The threat that Jonah gives here is, "repent or your city is going to be destroyed." I think it's important for us to realize that God takes no delight in the death of a sinner. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "The wages of sin is death." When we resist God, there are consequences to those actions and it saddens God's heart when we choose our own self-destruction.

This was brought home to me in a very visceral way. Just the other day I was at Bellarmine and I was preaching a day of prayer and the Gospel was Matthew 25, that familiar story of the sheep and the goats. Do remember that story? At the final judgment the Lord will assemble all of the peoples and he will divide them into sheep and goats. The sheep are those who have heard the word of God and acted with compassion especially toward the poor and the needy. The goats are those who have hardened their hearts. The sheep going off to eternal reward, the goats going off to eternal punishment. That's a favorite Gospel of mine, it was the Gospel at my first Mass. It's on this ring that I wear which was given to me on my ordination by my brothers and sisters. It has that Gospel text, "Lord when did we see you hungry?" inscribed in the inside.

It's a favorite Gospel so I have it memorized but for the first time as I was proclaiming that Gospel the other day, I just felt, or I tried to imagine what God felt as he was turning to all of those people who had rejected him. I have proclaimed that Gospel many many times, but for the first time the other day as I was proclaiming that Gospel, I felt this huge sadness in my heart. As I proclaimed that Gospel I started to weep because I just imagined God turning to these people who had hardened their heart and saying, "You have chosen destruction and my heart weeps for you. I take no delight in seeing you going into the pit of hell. That is not what I have wanted that's not why the Father created you, it's not why I died on the cross. What more could I have done for you to convince you that you are my beloved? You have stuck your fingers in your ear. You have closed your heart. You have blinded your eyes and you've refused to listen to me. And you have chosen your own destruction."

If you know the story of Jonah, you know that when the Ninevites converted, Jonah threw a fit; a hissy fit. He was angry that his enemies had converted and therefore God was going to be compassionate to them and so he just sulked because he wanted God to destroy them. Don't we want that sometimes of our enemies? There was a friend of mine who accused me of something that I didn't do. There was a misunderstanding between us. He lit into me for 45 minutes in a tirade, telling me what a terrible person I am and how much I had hurt him.

Eventually he said, "Oh well I understand that...Okay now there were some...now alright that's helpful... But you still did this and this and this! After 45 minutes of listening to this lambaste of what a terrible person I am, let me tell, you I was not feeling particularly compassionate. My prayers for him were, "Lord, (something along the lines of) just open his eyes and if you have to

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strike him to the ground and knock him senseless, whatever it takes in your mercy to open his eyes to help him see what a kind compassionate loving person I am."

Needless to say my thoughts toward him were not the kindest. I wish I could say this just happened a couple days ago, but it happened a couple weeks ago and I've been praying ever since because I feel my own shrunken heart. I want to live by an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth. He hurt me, I want him to hurt. Of course as soon as that rises to my consciousness I say, "No, I really don't want that." But that's the emotion that keeps coming up. I have to keep surrendering that to the Lord. "Lord I want only what's good. This person is my friend. I care about them. There was a misunderstanding. Help me let go of this anger. Help me to heal the hurt in my heart."

Precisely because the person was a friend, I let them deep into my heart and so the hurt has been deep and it doesn't heal overnight. Isn't there a bit of Jonah in all of us? That's not the heart of God. The heart of God is mercy and kindness and compassion. God wants us to repent because when we close our hearts we choose our own sadness; we choose our own self-destruction; we choose our own sorrow and our own isolation. And God weeps. God weeps when we turn away.

As any parent weeps when a child makes bad choices, and the child throws a little hissy fit, and the parent says, "Why are you doing this I only want what's best for you?"

Let me close with this little prayer poem I wrote the other day:

*As a mother's heart is tuned
to the voice of her child in a crowd,
teach us to sift through the many voices
that confuse our minds
and crowd our hearts.
Attune us to the voice of the Beloved.
For in listening to his life-giving words
and gazing upon his radiant face,
we come to relish his life-giving revelation:
We are the de-light of God,
called to shine like the Son!*

- J. Michael Sparough, SJ