

## **THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-B**

**January 21, 2018**

*First Reading – Jonah 3:1-5, 10*

*Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 25*

*Second Reading – Corinthians 7:29-31*

*Gospel – Mark 1:14-20*

**My dear people of God:**

I pray that you will feel the urgency of the call for repentance by our three readings today. All three of this Sunday's readings present an urgent call.

Jonah tells the people of Nineveh that their sins have resulted in their incurring God's wrath, and the Ninevites listened and repented. St. Paul told the Corinthians that time was running out. Jesus proclaimed the need to embrace the Gospel before they have no more time. Jesus begins His preaching by proclaiming, *"The time of fulfillment is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel."* He then calls His first disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John.

We heard from the First Reading how Jonah encouraged the Ninevites to depart from their evil ways by a stern warning: *"Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed."*

Repentance is the way to return to God. The people of Nineveh believed God and proclaimed a fast. They put on sackcloth. God did not do the evil He had threatened the Ninevites. To be repentant and to continue being on the road to heaven, we need to repeat to ourselves the Responsorial Psalm: *Teach me your ways, O Lord.*

We can declare joyfully with the Psalmist: *Good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice and teaches the humble his way.*

From the Second Reading we heard that Saint Paul sounded pessimistic and fatalistic, but he certainly made sense: *"I tell you, brothers and sisters, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not*

*owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away”.*

Allow me to go slowly as we meditate on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Please know that this is a response to questions from the community of believers at Corinth. Prior to this section which we heard today, Paul has taken up a series of issues:

1. *He writes that the single life is better, but recommends marriage to help prevent sexual immorality (7:1-9).*
2. *He urges that believers not divorce one another, although conceding that divorce might be necessary in some cases (7:10-16).*
3. *He counsels those who become Christians not to make changes. For example, slaves should not think that they must become free, but accept freedom if it is offered (7:11-24).*

This time, Paul turns again to the matter of singles and married couples. He recommends that they remain in their present state (7:25-28). The basis for his recommendation is: *"in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are"* (7:26).

In short, Paul's *imminent eschatology*, or his sense of the end of all things coming soon, governs all that is being said. It is the foundation for the way of life that he recommends.

Brothers and sisters: it is extremely important to notice Paul's use of the words *"as not"* five times over in these three verses. So, Paul says, one is to live (1) *"as not"* married, (2) *"as not"* weeping, (3) *"as not"* rejoicing, (4) *"as not"* owning, (5) *"as not"* using the world. These are the summarized dealings with the world in general.

So, how do we appreciate Paul’s advice? We need to think that we must be “disengaged” from the world, for all is transitory. There is no point in becoming consumed or even entangled with the world and its concerns, for the *"present form of this world is passing away."*

Amidst these examples, it is helpful to put side-by-side two words: *"disengagement"* and *"engagement."* In his ethical thinking, Paul calls us to disengage from the world and its ways of living. We should step back and see

how being entangled with it can be a captivity – a captivity that prevents from living the new life in Christ.

But that is not the end of the matter, for we continue to live in this world and have to deal with it. In Paul's way of thinking, disengagement is not an end in itself. Rather, being disengaged and free, we can engage the world from the perspective of being one who is "in Christ." Nothing in this world can compare to the eternal fellowship we have with God in Christ. Dealing with the world is inevitable and important.

We need to deal with it well for the sake of our families. We need to maintain an "eschatological reserve," knowing that this is not all there is. Still, we should remain invested in the world and its ongoing concerns. Indeed, those who pray for the kingdom and expect Christ to come in glory are bound to be engaged in the world and its struggles. Knowing the certainty of God's ultimate reign beyond history, we work to align the present and future with it.

Now, let us go to the gospel: Today's gospel from Mark seems to hasten the coming of Lent. While Lent this year starts on the fourteenth of February, we already heard today the Lenten theme of *"This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."*

There is an urgency in God's call that has a profound effect not just upon the person called, but upon others. When we respond to that call, we begin to realize that there are consequences: the demands become more pronounced.

But we also begin to feel that we are called to do more. We begin to feel a real vocation. Vocation is something that we are. It defines us.

In the course of a lifetime, modern people have many careers, many jobs. A young girl may begin as an aide in a day care. Then she may become an Early Childhood teacher. After a while, she may change professions and become a realtor. Maybe, she may go into investing through the money market or through stocks. She can become a financial consultant. People have many jobs, many careers. But this is not who they are, it is just something they are currently doing.

A vocation is something that you are. That same girl may become a wife and then a mother. Being Wife and Mother are not jobs, they are who she is. They are vocations. Even when her children move out to begin independent lives, she is still a mother, their mother. Same thing for a man.

Same thing for a priest. Priesthood is not a career that can be changed as some other man might change jobs. A person who is called to the priesthood is a priest forever, even if he no longer is in ministry.

When Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, and John, He did not call them just to do something; He called them to be something. Jesus called us to be His disciples. Why do you train your children in the faith through catechism and religion classes? Why do you guard against immorality in your home? Why do you worship God daily in your homes and weekly here in our Church? We do what we do because this is who we are. Doing or acting follows being. "*Agere sequitur esse*", Saint Thomas Aquinas taught us. We lose our sincerity, our integrity, when what we do is opposed to who we are.

But when we respond to that call of Christ within us to be a Christian in all our actions, then our actions reflect our inner life - the life of Jesus Christ we have been called to embrace, then we become who we really are. We must be willing to become whom Christ has called us TO BE; then we can do what we need to do, after becoming whom we have been called to be.

Our vocation as Christians is urgent, just as the call to faith was urgent for the first disciples, for the people of Corinth, and for the people of Nineveh.

These Sundays before Lent we are hearing Jesus' call to become missionary disciples. As Bishop John Barres has pointed out at the beginning of his episcopacy last year here in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, the Church has no future unless we become missionary disciples.

Happily, last Sunday, we learned about the first missionary disciple - Andrew. He met Jesus who invited him to "*come and see.*" After bonding with Jesus the entire day, Andrew went to his brother, Simon Peter and declared: "*We have found the Messiah,*" He brought Peter to Jesus. Jesus did the rest.

We also learned last Sunday that after John the Baptist saw Jesus coming, he declared that Jesus was The Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

This brings us to a difficult topic: sin and guilt. We must allow Jesus to free us from sin. Jesus tells us, "*repent.*" Repent means to make a new beginning, to refocus one's mind. It happened in Nineveh when Jonah preached. It can happen here in Valley Stream or in Elmont. It can happen in your life, your family. Repent.

People of God, make no mistake about it. Jesus doesn't simply say "repent." He says, "Repent and believe in the Gospel." To believe in the Gospel means to accept Jesus as the Lamb of God - the one who takes away the sins of the world. We must accept Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior. We must ask Jesus to take charge/control of our lives.

The invitation this Sunday is to repent and believe in the Gospel - to accept Jesus and become a disciple, and not just any disciple: but a missionary disciple.

Jesus began his public ministry with similar urgency: *“ This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.”*

Brothers and sisters: at stake is something enormous. Every day people buy lottery tickets. They hope to win the Lotto. But all the Super Lottos together are small potatoes compared to the kingdom of heaven. God's Kingdom has a higher price. But do not be afraid. In comparison to the kingdom, any sacrifice is small. It is time to place our bet.

We all heard early this week about a certain Mr. Shane Missler from Florida, who is only 20 years old. He works as a verification specialist at a background screening firm. He won the lotto last January 05<sup>th</sup>. He declared: “I'm only 20, but I hope to use it to pursue a variety of passions, help my family and do some good for humanity.”

Allow me to conclude this way: In comparison to the kingdom, any sacrifice is small. As the life of G.K. Chesterton illustrates: *Whatever the cost, now is the time to place your bet.*

Amen.