

Homily for The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (24th January 2021)

If I were to ask you what is odd about the Book of Jonah, I imagine you might laugh at me. What is odd: apart from Jonah being eaten by a whale, living in its belly for three days, and then being vomited up onto dry land? What's odd apart from the fact that not only the people of Nineveh, but all the animals too, fast and wear sackcloth in repentance? What is odd apart from God making a plant grow up to shelter Jonah from the sun one day, and killing it the next, or the fact that the story seems to stop in the middle, we don't really know how it ends and the last words are a question that never gets answered? Yes, actually there is something else very odd about this story, and it is hiding from us in plain sight: Nineveh, the city Jonah is sent to preach to, the city that God is threatening to destroy, is not a Jewish city, it is a Gentile one. Every single one of the prophets is sent to preach to the people of Israel that they need to turn back to God, their God, to fall in love with him again if they want to avoid disaster, with just one exception: Jonah. He, alone, is sent to preach to a non-Jewish city that it is going to be destroyed because of its wickedness. That is very unusual, and once you start to think about, it is very odd. Perhaps this is, at least in part, why Jonah runs away when he is first sent to Nineveh. You can imagine him thinking that telling a whole city to change its ways would be a bit scary; but perhaps he is also thinking 'Nineveh, why Nineveh? Send me to a good Jewish town that's fine, but what is the deal with Nineveh?'

In sending Jonah to Nineveh, God is starting a new phase of dealing with people. It is no longer enough to have a special relationship with just the people of Israel, God wants to draw all people into friendship and intimacy with him. This generosity is hard for Jonah to take in, and he runs away. He is quite happy with the old way. Contrast this with the Gospel reading. Jesus walks by the lake speaking words of peace, words of hope. The time has come: not 'a' time, or a special time, or one of the important times, but 'the' time, a time like none that has gone before, and none will come again. This is 'the' time, a unique moment. It is unique because the kingdom of God has come, a new way of doing things, a new set of priorities, a new way of relating to God, to the people around us, and to the world. This new way is something radical, and challenging and it will need a change of heart if we are to take it on board properly, so as soon as he has promised the new way the Lord calls people to repent and believe – to allow their hearts to be reformed. The he calls to Simon, and he follows him; the same with Andrew, James and John. Where Jonah was overwhelmed with the new thing he was being asked to do, these four men allow their hearts, their whole way of seeing the world, to be turned upside down, and so they follow the Lord.

It is all too easy for us to lapse back into old familiar ways, or into the expectations of the world around us. The Gospel message is always new, always challenging, always exciting. It is always nudging us and pushing us into new places, and always asking us to look at our present circumstances, the world of this today, in a new and different way. Often, however, we resist this and jump on a boat that is headed in the other direction. Two things stand in the way of us opening our hearts up to God's radical new plans. One is our understandable love for the familiar, the well-known, the usual; the other is the narrative that the world

around us likes to proclaim of a church that is tired and old and out of touch, and too easily we allow ourselves to believe this at some level, even though the reality is that the church is telling a new tale in each generation. The world is not keen to hear this, as it is much more comfortable writing us off as tried and failed, but we do need gently to decline to accept this.

The call of Jonah, and the call of the first disciples, are both calls to something new. Jonah runs away, but the disciples accept the challenge and follow. The disciples allow themselves to be surprised by God, but Jonah doesn't. If there is one thing that the readings today have to say to us it is this: the Lord is always challenging us to things that are new, and the church is always able to respond. The reality is that it is the secular world that is trapped in responses that are conditioned by the culture of today; the church, living as she does in the culture of eternity, is always up for something new.