

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Readings: *Jonah 3.1 – 5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7.29 – 31; Mark 1.14 – 20*

Gospel

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Mark 1.14 – 20

Homily

The scriptures are full of big and impressive personalities, and the dramatic circumstances of their lives. This Sunday at Mass we are reminded of the great prophet Jonah, whose life story was far from ordinary; reminded too of the call of the four ordinary trawlermen turned apostles: Peter, Andrew, James and John. And between them we heard a passage from one of the most dramatic of all Christianity's A-list celebrities, St Paul, once the Church's severest persecutor who became its most fervent evangelist and architect. Their stories and their reputations are so large, the images of their deeds in two thousand years of Christian art so memorable, that while we admire them and draw great lessons of faith from them, most people are left over-awed, unmoved, untouched, and unchanged by them. However much God teaches us lessons of faith through them, their lives are lived on too large a scale for us mere mortals to be able to connect.

One of the consistent features of such lives is that they seem to have been totally disrupted by God. They dramatically – and often immediately – change direction. Time and again in the scriptures a person's settled existence, in their land, their tribe, their occupation, their wealth and social status, or even their ability to have children, suddenly *changes!* No doubt the changes were costly, often involving separations from family and home and routine, as were the uncertain futures to which they were called. But it leaves us feeling all the more that their lives are *unlike* ours; and as a result we downscale our expectations of what God is ever likely to do in and through us.

And if that is true of all these men and women, how much more true of Jesus. We may be lost in our admiration, love and longing for Him. But He too is perhaps at too great a distance for us to feel able to respond in any meaningful way to His call,

'Follow me'. How might I do that? we ask ourselves. Follow Him? But how? Most Christians are settled. They belong in a particular community, in particular networks and places. Even allowing for a few new social trends, are we to expect to leave our work, our families, our children and dependents, our possessions and job prospects, to follow Christ? If you are young, or single, or poor, perhaps you might take such a risk. But should all believers be ready to leave their work and family behind, all the important responsibilities that fill our days and our projects?

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Well perhaps St Paul in the second reading can help us to see what attitude is proper for a Christian believer.

Paul's not saying that Christians must all be ready to pull life up by the roots, and *give everything up*. He's saying that Christians should give everything *over*, over to God, and that because the resurrection now fills them they must live in the world *without becoming engrossed in it* (1 Cor 7.31). They should live as though the kingdom of God was already fully underway.

Let me say just a bit more. Following his conversion (which the Church celebrates tomorrow), St Paul *matured* in his experience of Christ. It had been the experience that utterly changed his adult life. What happened to him on the road to Damascus is what Jesus asks in today's Gospel: Paul had repented and believed in the Gospel (cf Mk 1.15). In that moment Paul understood that his salvation *did not depend on human things* (his good works, the law, wealth, or ideas). It depended instead on the fact that Jesus *died for him* who had persecuted the Church, and now *shares His risen life with him*.

That's the truth that enlightens every Christian life: yours, and mine, and others'. And to be converted (and we all are, because none of us were *born* Christian!) means for each one of us, to believe that Jesus 'has loved *me*, and has given Himself for *me*' (as Paul says in Gal 2.20); that He *died* for me, *rose* for me, and *lives* with me, and in me. I can escape life's quicksands (of pride and sin, deceit and sadness, selfishness and false securities); and I can come to know the richness of Christ's love, take His hand, and entrust myself to the power of His forgiveness.

Now, Jesus teaches that whoever believes in God like that – as a Father full of love for his children – will want to put the search for God's kingdom and God's will *first*, and seek to live by faith in God's providence. Of course doing that will not exempt us from the sometimes exhausting struggle to live by faith, but it *will* free us from anxiety and from the fear of tomorrow.

This teaching of Jesus's is true for everybody, but it will be lived out in different ways in keeping with the ways in which God calls different individuals. A Franciscan brother or a Carmelite sister is able to follow it in a more radical way, whereas a parent in a family must fulfil their duties towards their spouse and family; and a worker to his or her colleagues. But in *every* case, Christian lives will be

recognized by their absolute trust in the heavenly Father, *because that is as it was for Jesus*. It is precisely His relationship with God the Father that gives meaning to the whole of His life, and so it must give the same meaning to ours. He has shown that of course we can live our lives with great compassion and attention to the concrete situations of our families and our neighbours. But what truly matters is that at the same time our hearts should always be in heaven, aware of heaven, and immersed in God's mercy.

Dear brothers and sisters, every day we ask the Lord, 'Thy will be done on earth – as it is in heaven' (*Matt 6:10*). In other words we recognize that there is a will of God with us and for us, a will of God for our life that must become every day, increasingly, the guide of our wills and our beings. 'Heaven' is where God's will is done, and where the earth becomes heaven – a place where love, goodness, and truth are present – God's will is done. Whatever our life is like, whether we live with lots of limitations and obligations, or we don't, we are called to let heaven's will be done on earth.

In the light of these scriptures, I invite you to call upon the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Divine Providence, who all her life pondered and lived out the will of God, to help each of us see more clearly what the will of God is for us and how to embrace it in faith. When that happens, I assure you, you will not be overawed by anyone. You will be filled with joy.