

This past Wednesday the first reading for weekday Mass was from the Book of Jonah. The Book of Jonah is one of the shorter books of the Bible and yet, like all Scripture, it is packed with great teaching. Since this reading is given to us during Lent, the Church obviously holds that Jonah has teaching relevant to Lent.

First of all, consider a little bit about Jonah's relation with God before his call for a special mission. Jonah was an Israelite, which meant that he would have practiced the usual religious practices of the Jews, and it meant he would have studied what God had revealed. In other words, Jonah would have been like Mass-attending Catholics today, perhaps even more than that. He took relation with God with at least some degree of seriousness. Jonah was not a pagan or an atheist or even a worldling per se. The Book of Jonah, then, is speaking to Church-going Catholics, or to those who at have at least some belief in God.

Now recall what happened with Jonah. He was called by God to go preach to the Ninevites and tell them that, because of their evil, they would be destroyed in 40 days. But instead of going and doing what the Lord told him, Jonah tried to run away...in effect, flee from God! But there is no escaping God. Sooner or later we all have to face Him, and sooner is much better than later. So Jonah got on a ship bound for the city of Tarshish, a Gentile city/territory – he was leaving Israel to get away from God and this mission to Nineveh.

Why? Would it not be an honor to be called by God for a special mission? Well one of two things would happen if Jonah did what God commanded him, neither of which would be good for him in the here and now. On the one hand, the Ninevites would not believe him, in which case, they'd probably kill him. On the other hand, if they did believe him and then repented, Jonah knew that God was merciful and that He would probably spare them and then there would be no proof of what he proclaimed. So he fled the mission God had given him.

This first point alone provides something important to ponder. The Lord has given everyone some role in building up His Kingdom, a mission. Some are parents, some priests, some are teachers, and so on. The question is, am I like Jonah? Do I run away, at least to some degree, from my God-given mission? Or, do I consider it an honor to work for the Lord in the role He has given me, bringing it to mind every day and offering myself to Him daily? I ran away for a lot of years. But as we will see, the Lord does give second chances.

So Jonah got on the ship but then the Lord kicked up a big squall on the sea and the ship was in danger of being destroyed. Everyone on board feared for their life. The men in charge were pagans but they at least believed in powers greater than themselves. They told everybody to pray to "their god." They also believed that someone had offended their god and that this god was kicking up the storm so they were trying to figure out who it was. Well Jonah was asleep when God brought on the storm but the crew found him. Jonah finally told them that the storm was on account of him. They were scared of such a powerful "god" and asked Jonah what they should do. Jonah told them to throw him overboard. But because they feared such a powerful god (the true God), they refused. Jonah insisted and finally they did it and this is when Jonah was swallowed by the "whale," or a "great fish" as Scripture says (we'll just say whale for simplicity).

Jonah spent 3 days in the belly of that whale. When he was finally spit out on shore, the Lord came to him a second time to tell him to go preach to the Ninevites. This time he did it. So what happened? Well Nineveh was a very large city for ancient times. The Book of Jonah said it took 3 days just to go through the whole city. Jonah proclaimed God's warning for just one day and the Ninevites believed him and repented.

The belief of the Ninevites is striking. Jonah is a foreigner preaching a foreign God to the Ninevites, who were entrenched in evil. And yet they believed him and repented. Even the king got involved, proclaiming a fast for everyone, that all should put on sackcloth, and that everyone should stop the evil they were doing. It is amazing that they believed Jonah and repented. Why? And why did Jonah go the 2nd time God commanded?

Something happened in the belly of that whale. The fact that Jonah was in the belly of the whale for *three* days was not lost on the Church Fathers. The Fathers point out the correspondence between Jonah's 3 days in the belly of the whale and our Lord's 3 days in the tomb. In other words, Jonah experienced some sort of death while in the whale, in particular – a death to self, to self-interest, to prioritizing his own desires for the here and

now over the will of God. This is Lent. Lent is a special time of repentance, which means a special time for examining ourselves for how we have prioritized our own desires over the will of God, over service to the Lord. And then being truly sorry for that and entering into conversion – a turning around now to do the will of our Lord, like Jonah did. Don't be afraid of it, much less pridefully obstinate about it. Do we not believe that the Lord knows and wills the true good for us? Do I really believe in God, or not?

Coming back now to the conversion of the Ninevites, Jonah's proclamation had power, at least in part, because of his conversion, his conviction. But most of all Jonah's preaching was effective because he came with the authority of God. God gives each one what is needed to carry out the mission that He has given them. It's not easy, it is not without suffering, it is not without some cost to our own desires, to our own will, to our own comfort – but if we're truly following the Lord, trying to do His will and not my own, the person comes with the power of God – whether it is parenting, teaching truth, priesthood, whatever it is, provided it is God's will.

But let us go on a bit more with Jonah. The Ninevites repented and, as expected by Jonah, the Lord spared them. It was a tremendous honor for Jonah to not only take part in our Lord's work but then to see the fruit of it as well – which is not by any means always the case. So what did Jonah do then? Did he give praise and thanks to God? Actually no; in fact, he did the exact opposite! He went outside the city and sat there to see what would happen. And when he saw that God had mercy on the Ninevites, he actually became angered and complained to the Lord, saying: I knew this would happen, this is why I fled to Tarshish. He actually asked the Lord to take his life so that he wouldn't have to face the Ninevites who might now think he just made the whole thing up. And the Lord said to him: “do you do well to be angry?”

Now this is an important thing to notice. Jonah experienced a real death to self in the belly of the whale, enough that he then turned (conversion) to do the will of the Lord, to do what God had commanded him, to carry out his mission. BUT, his conversion, his death to self, was not complete. This is so important to realize: we do not reach God, become what we are meant to be, how we are meant to be, all in one step. Jonah began to enter into conversion, he took a big step, but there was still a lot of self-interest left in Jonah. We must rid ourselves of any notion of: I have arrived, I'm the one who believes in God, I'm a good person. Conversion progresses in stages. An initial conversion, like Jonah's, is good but then we must embrace the virtue of humility with renewed vigor, knowing that I still have a ways to go.

Continuing now with Jonah...he's sitting outside Nineveh watching. The sun was hot and beating on him, to an extent that he became faint. The Lord then made a plant grow to shade him and Jonah was exceedingly grateful for it. But the next day the Lord took away the plant with a “scorching east wind” and then Jonah got steamed again, complained to the Lord, and asked to die again. Now of course the Lord did not do this just to aggravate Jonah, He wanted to draw the anger out of Jonah, He wanted him to enter now more deeply into conversion.

So what was the lesson that God wanted to impart to Jonah with the plant? What was it in Jonah's thinking that He wanted to change? Well God revealed it. He said to Jonah – are you angry because of the plant, a plant that you put no effort into growing? You pity the plant (its loss). Should I not also pity the Ninevites where more than 120,000 people live, and their cattle as well? What our Lord said to Jonah, He now says to us well. We want good things, like the mercy of God, for ourselves; should we not also want them for others? Indeed, should I not even be willing to suffer – like our Lord did for us – in order to bring about those good things for others? God was trying to draw Jonah out of himself, away from his dog-headed focus on his own desires and his own comfort, which is contrary to the nature of love and thus to the nature of God. To be part of His kingdom, we have to be His sons and daughters. But to be His sons and daughters, we have to be like Him. The trials and tribulations we experience, the disruptions to my desires and comfort – like Jonah with the plant – are allowed by God to bring that about. He does not desire our suffering. He desires that we become like Him, like we are meant to be, so that He can bestow a Kingdom upon us. If we are always comfortable, how can that come about? How can it come about if we do not have opportunities to exercise love of God and neighbor?

God bless you, Fr Kahn