

## The Exigency of the Word

This Sunday's first reading is taken from the *Book of Jonah*. This small book of Hebrew scriptures is at once amusing, challenging and consoling. Usually when we hear the name Jonah we think about the man in the whale, but the story of Jonah is far more than this. The story begins with Jonah being told by the Lord to go to the great, pagan city of Nineveh and proclaim to the people there that due to their immorality, God's wrath was coming upon them. Now, if you look at a map of the ancient East you find that Nineveh was located North East of Palestine. Jonah went West. He boarded a ship that was headed as far away as he could get from where the Lord wanted him to be. Why was he disobedient? It appears that he thought that it was too dangerous for him, a Hebrew, to be preaching repentance in a pagan city renowned for its immorality. He hoped that if he ran away from the Lord, the Lord would look for someone else for this difficult mission.

A tempest came up while Jonah was on the ship. The mariners were frightened. They had never seen anything like this. They prayed to their gods for deliverance to no avail, as Elijah and also the *Psalms* would say, "No one responded because no one was listening." They asked their Hebrew passenger, Jonah, if he had offended his God, and then Jonah told them that he was trying to avoid the mission that God had called him to. That's when they threw Jonah into the drink. The storm stopped. Meanwhile, trying to stay afloat in the sea, Jonah called to God for help.

God helped, but not in a very pleasant way. A large fish came and gobbled Jonah up whole. Part of the humor here is that Jonah was so sour that the whale couldn't bear having him for lunch, so out came Jonah onto the shore. Perhaps the people of Nineveh would have found Jonah strange before this incident, there is no doubt that after the ordeal Jonah was bizarre. By the way, the US Navy has records of a sailor who had a Jonah experience, he was spit out by a whale and lived. His hair was gone, his eyes bulged and his skin was bleached. Like the sailor, Jonah must have been quite a sight.

Our reading for this Sunday begins here. Jonah finds that he has no

choice but to journey to Nineveh and tell the people there that God's wrath is going to come upon them due to their immorality. Now, the reading says, Nineveh is a large city, it took three days to walk through it. But after only one day, the people heard Jonah's message and repented and prayed that God would have mercy on them. The Lord wanted their conversion. He didn't want their death. So God did not carry out his plans. Now this really infuriated Jonah. Here he was telling the people that they were all going to die, just as God told him to proclaim, and then God changed his mind. The little man with the bad attitude said, "That's why I avoided you in the first place, Lord. I knew you were merciful and that I would end up looking bad. I wish I were dead." And with that Jonah went into the desert east of the city, built a hut for himself and waited to see if God would change his mind again and destroy Nineveh. God provided some sort of a plant that gave Jonah shade. Jonah fell asleep.

When he awoke, the plant had died. Jonah was really mad now, and complained vehemently to God. God responded, "You're concerned about the death of this plant that is nothing more than a weed. Can't you understand how much more concerned I am about the 120,000 people of Nineveh who have repented?"

The story of Jonah is a great story because it reminds us of the depth of the compassion of God for those who hear his word and respond to it immediately. The exigency of the Word of God is the theme of all the readings this Sunday. Paul tells the Corinthians, the time is short. Respond to the Lord today because the world as we know it is passing away. In the same way, Jesus' basic message as presented in our Gospel is simply: *"This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the good news!"*

Even though the millennium hysteria has subsided we should continue the Christian attitude of always being prepared for the end of time, or, at least, the end of our own time. We formulate intricate plans for our retirement, our vacations, etc, but we tend to put our plans for the end of our

lives on hold. We hear the voice of God in our consciences telling us that we have got to change some of our attitudes and our actions, but we shelve these thoughts until a more convenient time that may never come. The Lord, the Merciful and Compassionate One, forgives those who respond to his call. We would be rather presumptuous to think that he'll forgive us simply for our intention to some day respond to his call.

Jesus came to save the people of God. He came to save us. Save us from what? The forces of evil? Yes. From those who would destroy anyone who would do good? Certainly. From ourselves? Most assuredly.

The greatest tragedy in the world is the death of people who reject God. God does not want people to suffer the results of their own choices. He is always open to his people who invite him back into their lives. He sends prophets like Jonah, apostles like Paul, and his own son Jesus to convince us to let God into our lives.

There is so much negativity in the world. So many people despair because they cannot see a purpose for their lives. Jesus comes to give meaning and purpose to life.

Today's readings speak about the compassion of the Lord. The merciful One of the *Book of Jonah* has now come to save those who are open to his love. The Kingdom of God is at hand.