

Seton Hall University

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Winter 2009

Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (January 25, 2009)

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals

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THIRD SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
January 25, 2009

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

The call for change of heart, for repentance and a reorientation of our lives seems appropriate for Advent and Lent. But, knowing human nature over the millennia, the Church surprises us and challenges us today to overcome complacency and sins to respond to the Good News of Jesus.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

How grateful are we for the gifts of time and talents, of the graces that flow from our Baptism and Confirmation? We ask pardon for negligence and renew our response to the call of Jesus.

Lord, you offer forgiveness for our sins and failings, Lord, have mercy.
Christ Jesus, you heal and uplift us for service of your Father. Christ, have mercy.
Lord, you enrich us through Word and Sacrament. Lord, have mercy.

HEADINGS FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Jonah 3:1-5). Jonah learned the folly of fleeing from the Lord, of excusing himself from a teaching mission to Israel's longstanding enemy, the people of Nineveh. Amazingly, they took his harsh message to heart and repented as well as they knew, with fasting and sackcloth.

Second Reading (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). As converts from a culture that emphasized living for the moment, St. Paul put the human vocation in the context of our eternal destiny. Married couples should share all dimensions of conjugal joys and responsibilities, but within a context of prayer and hope for eternal happiness.

Gospel (Mark 1:14-20). Jesus challenged his followers to faith in the reign of God *now* so that they would bear witness to the coming of the Father's kingdom (the domain in which all creatures will obey). He chose ordinary people to learn from him to achieve this goal.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: The call to repent and believe is accompanied by abundant gifts of the heavenly Father. May the entire Church and her members be receptive to the divine will! We present our petitions in faith and confidence.

Reader(s):

For Pope Benedict and all who assist him in providing faith responses to problems and challenges of our time.

For all theologians and catechists, that their sense of fidelity to the Gospel be profound and mature.

For parents and godparents, may they offer a message of loving commitment to their faith.

For people in military service through the world, that they may seek justice and foster peace.

For those who have died, especially those who were alone in their last agony, that they will receive mercy.

President: Heavenly Father, gather these and all our deepest needs into this Eucharist. May these and all our petitions be offered in union with Jesus in Gethsemane: Not our will but yours be done. This we ask through the same Christ our Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

In preparation for Holy Communion, we pray as Jesus taught us.

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

Like Jonah, we have been called to reach out to those in need of God's Word. May this sign of peace stimulate us to become peacemakers in the Lord's name.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

The Lamb of God continues to call the Church and her members to rejoice in the forgiveness of sin and the fullness of life in the sacraments. May Christ's nourishing presence be the foundation for our service of God and neighbor throughout the coming week.

FINAL BLESSING

To Jonah God said: "Get up and go!" As we hear Christ's commission to go in peace, may we resolve to become peacemakers in all our words and deeds.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Jonah 3:1-5). Most prophets were called to a mission at the service of Israel's needs, especially when the king or priests were failing in their complementary roles. The story of Jonah seems to include a satirical look at the narrowness of some leaders in the Second Temple period. Ezra and Nehemiah focused on the second stage of the Jewish return to the Land and Jerusalem. Was there a concern for Israel's call to be a light to the nations? More marvelous than the encounter with a giant fish was Jonah's success in preaching to the people of Nineveh! The prophetic admonition was often couched in terms of condemnatory threats, but these were always conditional. All who sincerely repent will find that God is forgiving, merciful and compassionate (see Jonah 4:2).

Responsorial Psalm 25:4-9. The profound revelation of God's Name during Moses' second experience on Mount Sinai contains thirteen attributes (Exodus 34:6-7). Some of these are taken into psalms and prophetic texts, such as Psalm 25.

Second Reading (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). Perhaps St. Paul expected an imminent return of Jesus in triumph when he wrote to the Christians of Corinth. His assurance that couples should take marital privileges and responsibilities into their new life of faith provides a background for understanding the

passage concerning the short time that remains. Indeed, Christian faith and eschatological hope place marriage, business and mourning for deceased loved ones in a new perspective (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). But St. Paul also warned against idle loafers and exhorted all to work for their keep (2 Thessalonians 3:6-9). The lesson for us is to place all human relationships and the tasks of our vocation at the service of the Lord, realizing that the only reality of this life that perdures through eternity is charity (see 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13).

Gospel (Mark 1:14-20). The profound continuity in God's plan and in the work of his servants is indicated by Mark when he described John's Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4) and the initial summary of the Good News offered by Jesus. "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is near..." (1:15), which must be greeted in repentance and faith. The task of presenting the Gospel must be a collaborate effort, so Jesus called men to join him. Four fisherman may not have been likely candidates for such a mission but they were people of faith, imbued with a deep piety. The call of Jesus began with an invitation to an apprenticeship: "Follow me!" This would involve a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, during which the Master would mold them by word and example. They would learn to set aside personal ambitions and then, after being served by Jesus in laying down his life (see Mark 10:45), they would go out and proclaim the Good News everywhere (Mark 16:20).

REFLECTION

Over the years we have welcomed several Catholics from the People's Republic of China. As with the Catholics from Vietnam we sense that we may be in the presence of martyrs. They and their families have witnessed to the Faith courageously and have much to teach us. Those from China had no idea about the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. They remember the Ember days, the rigors of fast and abstinence during Advent and Lent... Has the Church in western nations perhaps gone soft? Or have *we* allowed ourselves to neglect aspects of her message?

Certainly there is a strong insistence in the Council documents that conversion and penance are an integral part of the Christian message. "The Church announces the good tidings of salvation to those who do not believe, so that all may know the true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, and may repent and mend their ways. To believers also the Church must ever preach faith and repentance" (*Constitution on the Liturgy* #9). There is a great value in the common practices such as Friday abstinence; however, adults should practice penance relating to areas of personal faults, bad habits and poor attitudes. It is not enough merely to take ordinary practices of Church discipline if we desire to repent and mend our ways. With the guidance of one's confessor, the universal call of the Gospel to repent must be applied to the particular circumstances of our lives. How can a person stand for the truth of the Gospel in adverse situations if no effort has been made to prepare for such challenges?

No, the Church has not catered to the whims of indulgent Christians. However, perhaps the message has not been proclaimed effectively in our society. The liturgical readings for this Sunday reiterate the themes of Advent and anticipate those of Lent. There is no room for complacency in the Christian life!

The story of Jonah depicts a prophet-missionary who deliberately shirks his duty. The second time he is called by God, he *does* journey to Nineveh. His message is grim, without the conditional nature of the threat being clear. Yet the people believed in God and proclaimed a fast to manifest their repentance. The Israelite readers of the Book of Jonah marvelled in God's mercy to their enemies and to this day the Jewish liturgy proclaims this text on the Day of Atonement each year. We, too, need to be reminded that God's election of a people has the purpose of extending his forgiveness and love to all humanity.

Secondly, we should realize that others may put us to shame by the depth and generosity of their response to God's call.

"Repent and believe the Good News!" This should be the Christian response to the knowledge that "the Kingdom of God is close at hand." The authority of God has been manifested in the coming of Jesus; those who believe should set aside all that is in conflict with the call to be learners or disciples of the Lord.

The Christian vocation is to be an acolyte, a follower of Christ. As we hear about Simon and Andrew, James and John in the Gospel, we should ask: "What have I done to become an active disciple?" Indeed, I appreciate the gifts of Baptism, Confirmation and other sacraments. But do I allow the common pursuits of "my way of life" to absorb my attention day after day, without examining critically whether all of these are consistent with the Gospel?

The passage from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians puts the challenge so bluntly that it is disconcerting. He certainly does not mean to imply that the human activities of marriage and business have no place in the Christian life. His point is that all aspects of life must be imbued with a love that places God first -- and only in the service of his Kingdom does anything else have lasting meaning.