

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-JANUARY 24, 2021

**READINGS: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10;
Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 25;
1 Corinthians 7: 29-31;
Gospel of Mark 1: 14-20**

Transformation: Christ is our focus

Did you receive an Emergency Alert notice on your cell phone the day after the health emergency was declared in the province? The Emergency Alert was about the COVID-19 lock down and it came as a jarring sound on the phone with a message that read: "A stay-at-home order is in effect. Only leave home for essential purposes, such as food, health care, or work. It is the law. Stay home, stay safe, save lives". The Emergency Alert is similar to the Amber Alert that is usually sent to cell phones to alert the public to a missing person. The Emergency Alert was to warn us about the lock down and it required our urgent and immediate response-- to stay home.

On this Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, our three readings describe stories of another form of an immediate response-- a response to a call about transformation of lives. We begin with the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Jonah. Today's passage is about the story of Jonah and the people of Nineveh. The passage begins with "The word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, 'Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you". Before today's passage comes a story that describes an earlier event in the life of the prophet. God had earlier sent Jonah to the city of Nineveh to warn the inhabitants-- the Assyrians to repent. But Jonah had tried to run away from his assignment.

Today's passage is about God's second call to Jonah. Jonah had gone to the city to proclaim God's message of repentance to the people of Nineveh. In the city, Jonah cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh would be overthrown". In the Bible the figure "forty" signifies testing and purification. For example, in the Book of Exodus, we read that the Israelites were tested as they wandered for forty years in the desert on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. The forty-day period was an ultimatum extended to the people of Nineveh to repent or face the consequences. Today's lectionary leaves out some verses that describe the people's response to Jonah's preaching. These verses tell us that the king of Nineveh, his people and their animals responded immediately and with urgency. They repented. They changed from their evil ways. The people's response to the prophet's message saved their lives. Because, God also changed his mind "about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it".

The story about Jonah and the people of Nineveh forms the backdrop to the Gospel passage from Mark. Today's passage comes after the passage we read on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Today's passage begins with the news that John the Baptist had been arrested. The Evangelist is alerting his readers to the fact that the focus was

on Jesus and his ministry. Jesus had come to Galilee to begin his ministry proclaiming the good news that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news”. We might be wondering what made Jesus go to the shore of Galilee to proclaim the good news. Is it possible that the four fishermen had heard Jesus speak at another location? We don’t know if they heard Jesus speak before. But we know that they felt the urgency and responded to his call to follow him.

What can we learn from the story of Jonah and the people of Nineveh and the story of Jesus and the four fishermen? The degree of urgency of the response of the people of Nineveh to God’s message is similar to that of the four fishermen to Jesus’ call. We can argue that the consequences would have been disastrous for the people of Nineveh if they had failed to repent. However, we cannot tell of any consequences if the four fishermen had failed to respond to Jesus’ call. In fact, we might even be wondering what made the four fishermen leave their livelihood and their families behind and to follow Jesus?

Last Sunday we read from the Gospel of John how Andrew and his brother Simon Peter became the first followers of Jesus. In that story, we noticed that the two disciples got to know who Jesus was. They learned that Jesus was the “Lamb of God” - an expression used by John the Baptist to describe Jesus. The Evangelist John wrote his story to develop his theology about the identity of Jesus. On the other hand, Mark wrote today’s narrative about the call of the first disciples to teach the early Christians what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus. Mark’s focus was on the type of response required by a person to become a follower of Jesus. According to Mark, discipleship requires a wholehearted response, a response with urgency that nothing on earth including family ties can stop.

This type of life is what Paul teaches in his First Letter to the Corinthians in the second reading. The passage can be described as a summary of the first reading and the Gospel passage. Paul wrote the Letter when he and the early Christians believed that the second coming of Jesus was imminent. Paul therefore encouraged the early Christians to develop an attitude of detachment from the things of this world “for the present form of this world is passing away”.

My friends in Christ, how can we apply today’s readings in our lives as people of faith? In our own situations and circumstances, how are we responding to God’s call to change our ways? How are we responding to Jesus’ call to follow him? We began our reflection today with the Emergency Alert that signaled the necessity to stay home. When we treat the message to stay home as a message that requires our immediate and complete attention, we may help reduce the spread of the virus and save lives. In Jesus’ call to the fishermen, there is a similar urgency. The fishermen left their nets to transform their lives into followers of Jesus.

Today’s readings encourage us that as Christians we are always being called to live so that we transform our lives. As Christians when we learn to develop an attitude of an urgent desire to change our ways, we reflect the Christian life-- a life that brings us

closer to God. As we continue on our journey of faith, let us ask God to teach us to live our lives with Jesus as our focus and to transform us into people of hope and love.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

(Please note that this homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance).