

*Images of Conversion*  
*Homily for 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time*  
*January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024*

Today's readings present us with images of conversion. Conversion involves moving from a preoccupation with myself – the world and its values, to Jesus' invitation to come and follow him. What we learn from our first reading and Gospel passage, is that conversion doesn't happen all at once, rather it is a process. The word conversion literally means "a turning". To convert is not merely to shift your mind from one idea to another. It is also to move your body in a certain direction.

Think for instance about Jonah. He was known as the reluctant prophet. God wanted him to be turned in a certain direction, towards the people of Nineveh – but at first Jonah goes in the opposite direction. God wants him to go East but Jonah goes West. God wants Jonah to be his messenger -but he chooses to resist God's call on his life.

This can be the case for many of us..... We sense the Lord is seeking our attention, inviting us into a place where we turn to him, but we can easily resist this call. It can take us many years before the Lord is able to get us to the place where, like Jonah, we hear and respond to his voice. Or to put it another way, conversion is multi-layered. As we live the years allotted to us, we are invited to a deeper turning toward Jesus.

It is worth noting that while our version of the passage from Jonah 3 leaves out the words "a second time", the full text reads in the Bible this way:

***"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."***

In between the first time God spoke to Jonah and the second time, Jonah faced a crisis of whale-sized proportions. Again, conversion can be like this, While the path of following God can be an adventure, that has moments of joy and exhilaration, it can also be marked by slogging, grunting, crawling and even querulous pouting.

This is what we see with Jonah. Even though he is now turned toward Nineveh and goes in the direction God had called him back in chapter 1, his attitude in one that is lacking in compassion for the people he is called to address. He declares that in:

***"40 Days Nineveh will be overthrown."***

You are about to get it, so watch out! He has no expectation of the Ninevites conversion, and there he is not expecting what happens next. They took Jonah seriously and there was a turning towards God described this way:

***The people of Nineveh believed God, they proclaimed a fast and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.***

Unlike Jonah, the Jewish man and prophet, who with reluctance believed God, these foreigners did believe. To fast and put on sackcloth are signs that my body is needing to pivot, to make a

turn toward God. What is the point of this story? Conversion can have such a significant impact on our lives that it can radically change the direction of our story. Listen again to the text from Jonah:

***When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them and did not do it.***

Notice the clear description of conversion, the people turned from their evil ways. They moved in a new direction. Then it says that God changed his mind about the calamity he said he would bring upon the people. What does this mean? Think about it like this. Because the people had been living in ways that were evil, the direction of their lives would have evil consequences as a result. But now as they are turning towards God, they enter a new place where they desire to do His will. Calamity would have resulted if they remained self-willed, calamity is averted because they are receptive to the leading of God and His will. It is in this way that God changes his mind because of the Ninevites having changed their mind about God.

When we change our mind about God it can and does impact our lives because we are now learning to listen to his voice.

Our Gospel readings teach us something about the context in which we are learning to listen to the voice of God. We are told that John has just been arrested. Peter and Andrew, James and John would have known John the Baptist and some of them might have been his disciples before they became Jesus' disciples. We know from John 1 that it was the Baptist who had introduced Andrew to Jesus and then Andrew introduced his brother Simon Peter to Jesus. Now here they are in a situation where one close to them had been arrested by Herod, whose heart was not turned towards God. It is always the way in the world that there will be those influences and forces opposed to Jesus and his purposes who are not at all interested in conversion.

However, this challenge and threat to the early community becomes the opportunity where Jesus declares that there is a kingdom at hand, with him as the king, but it is one so often hidden too most. That is because it requires a refashioning of our mind, the meaning of the word "repent and believe the Good News". What his invitation calls for is another reorientation. Don't allow for the affairs of the world to so guide and colour your life, that you miss immersing yourself in the affairs of God.

This is what St Paul is talking about in our second reading where he invites us to have a mindset that sees everything in this world with a Christ-centred perspective. He says that we need to see even the most important things in this world, like marriage, grief, and loss of loved one, our joys and successes, our relations to our material goods, our dealings in the world with a certain detachment. Why is that? He tells us at the beginning and the end of the passage:

***"The appointed time has grown short" .... And "The present form of this world is passing away".***

And this is the second point about conversion. When we have a change of mind about God it influences and changes how we relate to the world in its present form. This is not easy because

the world is so present, is always in our face and to hear God's still small voice invites us to a daily decision. That is to learn to follow Jesus.

Notice what St Mark tells us about the call to follow Jesus.

***“When Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew cast their net into the sea”.***

Before Simon and Andrew see Jesus, he sees them. This tells us another thing about conversion. It always begins with Jesus' initiative. Just as God saw the Ninevites before they saw him, so too Jesus with the disciples, and Jesus with you and me. And notice what is involved in following Jesus. It is to place ourselves in a position of trust, so he is guiding us. And then to realize that we have a share in the work of inviting others into this relationship of conversion. Together we are learning to say that while from time to time we may see the Lords' face, yet often because we are following him, more often we get glimpses of his back as he guides us through the dark places of this world. This can result in times of confusion, where we lose sight of him, and need to return once more to the path he is taking. Remember that for these first disciples they were not one and done. Some of the last words the Lord speaks to Simon Peter are in John 21 where Peter wants to know about the future of St John. Jesus responds to Peter by saying John's future doesn't concern you – you Peter come and follow me.

These images of conversion I pray will encourage and inspire us to remember Jesus always has his eye on us, especially when we are pre-occupied with many other things. This is so he can get our attention and invite us to follow him as we learn to know God more fully and discern his voice that speaks to us of this other kingdom that is at hand, a kingdom that is to come on earth in the lives of those who are praying:

***Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.***