

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; Cycle – B; Jan. 21st 2024
Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

Last Sunday the theme in the first reading and the gospel brought our attention to the call of Samuel and the first disciples. In today's first reading and gospel too we notice the continuation of the call of God. Initially almost all the Prophets made all sorts of excuses before the Lord to evade from the mission. But no one has ever resisted and became disobedient as Prophet Jonah. When we listen to today's passage of the Book of Jonah, we get the impression that he went to Nineveh with a free will. But if we take the first part of the small book of Jonah we read about his futile attempt to run away from God's command and how God twisted his arms and brought him back to the mission.

Of course, Jonah had reason to refuse God's plan for him to take up this mission in Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. First of all, Assyria was the bitterest enemy of Israel and like any Israelite Jonah too wanted to see the destruction of Nineveh. Secondly, Jonah was afraid that they would kill him for declaring the bad news of their destruction. Finally, though quite unwillingly, Jonah started his mission in that big city announcing to the residents, **"In Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed."** But to his shock, when he just finished only one day's journey in the city, the people took seriously the message of the prophet and wore sackcloth as a sign of their repentance. When the king heard about it he too left his royal robes and even sat in the ashes wearing the sackcloth. It is said in the book how God changed His mind, **"When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them, he did not carry it out."**

We can learn couple great lessons out of this incident. Though Assyrians were the enemies of Israel, God didn't consider them as enemies, rather He viewed them as weak human beings who should be saved. It is clear that God does not show any sort of discrimination to any one irrespective of nations, religions, caste and creed. Of course, Jonah was really upset over the attitude of God. The second lesson we learn from this incident is that God does not ask for any big penitential acts from sinners, rather only a **simple sign of repentance** for their sins. God was pleased by the repentant attitude of the people of Nineveh and He totally forgave their sins.

The history shows that the chosen people of Israel never remained faithful to God at any time in their lives. But the moment when they repented, God simply forgave them. We have got number of such incidents in the Old Testament. In the Book of **Isaiah 1:18** God says, **"Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow;**

though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool.” It shows how merciful and forgiving God is. The sum and substance of the teachings of all the Prophets were the same, **“Repent for your sins and come back to God.”** Please listen to the words of Prophet Joel, **“And rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster”** (Joel 2:13).

In today’s gospel Mark gives us the opening statement of Jesus, which was nothing but the repetition of the instruction of the Prophets. Jesus says, **“The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel”** Jesus does not place any impossible tasks before the sinners; but the simple sign of repentance for their sins. He is a merciful and forgiving God to those who just repent. **In the entire Bible the word Forgiveness occurs 47 times and the word mercy comes up more than 250 times.**

Once, gone far away from God, sometimes people doubt whether God will forgive their sins which are very grave? With that fear in mind many continue to live in the sins without making any efforts to make a comeback. If the good parents can forgive the wrong doings of their children, no doubt, our heavenly Father can forgive us of any grave sins and we should not doubt this great truth even a moment. Through the parable of the prodigal son Jesus speaks very emphatically, how caring and forgiving is the Heavenly Father to His repentant children.

We, the children of our heavenly Father, fail in many ways and offend Him. But when we repent and make a comeback we will see the the Father waiting at the door to welcome us. As Jesus says in the parable of the lost sheep, **“I tell you; in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.**