



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

Jonah

Readings: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10, Ps 24, 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31, Mark 1: 14-20

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in the section on Revelation, we are instructed how to read Scripture under the authority of the Magisterium. One of the sections reminds us that, for all the wide variety of types of Scripture in the Bible (e.g. History, Mysticism, Poetry, Wisdom, Hymns, Letters, Gospels etc) , there are two fundamental senses in which it may be read.

The first and foundational is the literal understanding – the obvious meaning conveyed by the words – for example, Jesus walked on the water.

The second sense is the spiritual and this is subdivided into three sections. A) Allegorical – Jesus had shown His mastery of creation and thus His Divinity B) Moral – When Peter trusted Jesus he too did the same. When he doubted he sank. C) Anagogical – (leading us into eternal significance) We see the triumph of the Church , with Christ on board, to ride out the storms of darkness and chaos.

Got it?

Nowhere in the Old Testament do we see this beautiful pattern played out more succinctly than in the great little Book of Jonah.

Literally then.....Jonah is a disobedient prophet. God wants him to call the great corrupt and brutal pagan civilisation of Nineveh to repent.

Jonah catches the first ship going to the furthest point of the known world. The storm that threatens to wreck the ship can only be calmed by throwing Jonah overboard. The pagan sailors are more in awe of the Almighty than Jonah and they do all they can to save him. Eventually he is cast into the sea, swallowed by a mighty fish and, three days and a lot of penitential prayer later, vomited out onto dry land and recommissioned to do the same job. Jonah does it with much bad grace, is utterly astonished when the blighters repented and hugely disappointed at the merciful response of God.

Allegorically..... the Hebrew reader would have recognised this description. Jonah, the name means 'Dove', represents Israel, the People of God. It is their calling to remain faithful and obedient to the one true God and be His witness to the pagan nations and bring all men to repentance and a knowledge of the loving mercy of God. This they have singularly failed to do in their frequent disobedience to God. They are punished for this in their defeat and the great exile to Babylon. Here they spend time in the belly of the empire of Dagon, the fish god before being thrown back safely into their own land and with the same mission. Morally.....Best to be obedient to God. If you dodge your vocation as an individual or a civilisation it ends in disaster. Don't be afraid to tell people about God and don't be shocked if they listen.

Anagogically.....what's the end game?

Jonah is the primary story about mission and it speaks powerfully to us. All too often as the Church in the West we do not evangelise or call to repentance. We are intimidated by the secular power. We are not sure of ourselves. We don't trust the power of God's Word. We are not convinced and are, therefore, unconvincing. We do not believe that a civilisation is hell-bound or we would be urgent in our wanting to share the Faith. We have bought the great relativist lie that there is no objective truth, no God's truth, just 'your truth and my truth'.

So, like Jonah, we make sure we are on that ship to Tarshish, about as far from the mission's cutting edge as possible. We are now in a civilisation rejecting God and, like Jonah, we would be astonished if they turned back now. Maybe, like Jonah, we are convinced we would look foolish to speak God's Word forthrightly or maybe, worse, don't think we should share the mystery of salvation with all those others (who don't know their right hand from their left – God's description of the Ninevites) for whom Christ died.

And would we, like Jonah, be disappointed if people repented and embraced the mercy of God? Let us hope not. However we read our Bibles, literally, allegorically, morally, anagogically, the little Book of Jonah is a mission check list for our time.

Be obedient. Be cheerful. Be hopeful. Be grateful. Remember these are people Christ died for too. It is not you who will convert people but His Word faithfully proclaimed and lived. And Tarshish wasn't that interesting anyway.