

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Feb 17th 2016

As this is the first full week of Lent, it is easy to hear the themes of repentance, judgment and forgiveness in today's readings. In the first, Jonah sets out for Nineveh to preach a message of repentance punctuated with fear and threat of punishment. The response is astonishing – every preacher's dream-come-true! All put on sackcloth and ashes, even the King, and he himself proclaims a time of fasting and repentance. Later in this story, we learn that Jonah was angry at God's change of heart towards the Ninevites and waited to see whether God would still punish them, reflecting his own sense of justice, not God's.

We are so like Jonah, desiring goodness and prosperity for ourselves and others, and yet also wanting “evil doers” to be punished. Why should terrorists, criminals, selfish people, druggies (name any group you despise) receive the same measure of mercy as I do? It offends our sense of justice and fairness. Pope Francis said it well several years ago: “I think we too are the people who, on the one hand, want to listen to Jesus, but on the other hand, at times, like to find a stick to beat others with, to condemn others. And Jesus has this message for us: mercy. I think — and I say it with humility — that this is the Lord's most powerful message: mercy. ...God's mercy...is an abyss beyond our comprehension.”— Homily on March 17, 2013

In the Gospel reading, Jesus says to the crowd “This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah.... And there is something greater than Jonah here.”

The Jonahs of today don't fare as well as he did, at least in terms of “results”. Fear doesn't motivate us anymore; we tune out the doomsday messages. If there is going to be destruction, we know that it is more the result of human actions, not God's. Perhaps Pope Francis is the sign of Jonah today pointing to “the more” -- something greater, something more deeply satisfying than our meager sense of fairness. If we listen deeply enough, we all hunger for God's tremendous love and mercy, not just for ourselves, but for everyone. Again quoting Pope Francis: “God's mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones (cf. Ez 37:1-14). ... Let us be renewed by God's mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.” - Easter Urbi et Orbi message on March 31, 2013

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