

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time B
Jon 3:1-5, 10; 1 Cor 7: 29-31; Mk 1: 14-20
January 21, 2024

Last Sunday we heard John's account of the first disciples meeting Jesus: Andrew, Peter, and another disciple whom we presume to be John himself. That took place by the river Jordan. Today we hear Mark's account which takes place by the Sea of Galilee. Between what we heard last week, and we heard today, the disciples obviously move back to their home area, Galilee, and get to know Jesus better. That is why by the time we get to what Mark describes today, Jesus is able to call them to be his disciples, to follow him, and why they immediately left everything, family, job, friends.

As they followed Jesus during the next three years, they would have so much to learn that they could only learn it gradually. That is because following Jesus affects every corner and aspect of every day, not just an hour a week. The gradual learning by the disciples of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus is sometimes thought to be symbolized in the blind man being healed by Jesus in two stages in this Gospel. It is the only miracle where Jesus had to lay his hands on the sick person a second time to bring about the healing. Just as the healing of the blind man later in this Gospel took place in stages, the spiritual vision which the disciples had to learn from Jesus also occurred in stages. The disciples would be formed and changed by the word of God gradually over the next few years.

An important new stage in their spiritual vision, formation, and being changed by the word of God, was when Jesus called the twelve of his disciples to become Apostles, which means "*one sent out*." We read this event in Mark's Gospel (3:13-14), but it is clearest in Luke Gospel. Luke tells us that Jesus gathered all his disciples together and out of those disciples he chose twelve to be his apostles. What we have in today's Gospel is their first calling to follow him; later they will be called a second time to become apostles. Jesus invites everyone to follow him by receiving the Sacrament of Baptism, and he calls a small number to also be ordained priests by receiving the Sacrament of Holy Orders. (Everyone since their baptism is invited by Jesus to be

formed and changed by the word of God and some are called to do so in a particular way receiving the Sacrament of Holy Orders).

Jonah in today's first reading also had to learn what following God meant. The Book of Jonah is usually regarded as something like a parable; it has much to teach us.

We heard in the passage from the Book of Jonah the second time God called Jonah. The first time he was called by God, Jonah would not accept the God's call. He was called to preach to the Ninevites, to convert them so they would be saved. The Ninevites were Israel's enemies, so Jonah did not want them to be saved. The first time God called Jonah, he jumped on a ship and headed west, the opposite direction he was supposed to go.

During a huge storm while the ship was sailing, Jonah asked to be thrown overboard to save the people on the ship. He was swallowed by a large fish and was in its belly for three days.

He was spit out on a beach by the fish, dead, but then rose to life. (Reminiscent of Jesus three days in the tomb). After he rose from the dead, he answered God's call to preach to the Ninevites. Reading the Book of Jonah in its original Hebrew reveals something fascinating that we do not see in the English translations. The word "*evil*" is used in describing Jonah as often as it is for describing the Ninevites. Jonah too had to repent of the evil within him and allow himself to be formed and changed by the word of God. Jonah in the parable-story; the disciples who would become Apostles; and all of us, need to allow the word of God to penetrate us so that we may become more fully who God calls us to be.

It is precisely because the word of God is to help us become who we are meant to be, that Pope Francis has asked that the Word of God be honored in a special way on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time every year. It would be good especially today, to remember where the location of the Bible is in our homes, and if it has appropriate importance there. This also reminds us to begin again to read the Bible frequently if we have been neglecting to do so. A good place to begin would be with any one of the four Gospels.

I have, at times, been saddened to see over the past few months, the word of God being misused by a small number of well-intentioned but misguided people to support conspiracy theories.

You cannot take one line of Sacred Scripture and make it say what you want. We cannot force a meaning onto Sacred Scripture.

Instead, we have to allow the Word of God to form and change us, just as it had to form and change Jonah in the story, and Jesus' disciples.

Our Catholic way of understanding Scripture is to figure out what the sacred writer intended, not what we want Scripture to say, but what the sacred writer intended to say. We arrive at that meaning by looking at a line of Scripture in its context, not in isolation on its own. I say jokingly, but also seriously, that there are three basic rules for understanding Sacred Scripture: context, context, and context. To understand a line of Sacred Scripture, we first read it in the context of its paragraph; we read it in the context of the chapter; and we read it in the context of its book. By doing that and paying attention to what the author intended, we will avoid misusing a line of Scripture for our own purpose or for conspiracy theories.

We cannot force a meaning onto Scripture; it is Scripture that forms and changes us.

Jonah had to allow himself to be formed by the word of God. The disciples spent years allowing themselves to be formed by

God's word. We too, are called to allow ourselves to be formed by the Word of God. We cannot take one line of Scripture to make it say what we please. Instead, we allow the Scripture to speak to us.

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.