

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 24 (25); 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near

Mark 1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Mark 1:16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Sunday Gospel is in two parts, the first part of which gives the core invitation and the second part narrates the call of the first disciples. The alert reader will notice a considerable contrast between this gospel and the passage from John read last Sunday. The Fourth Gospel offers much more psychologically and humanly believable versions of the call stories in John 1:29-51. In Mark, the human interest dimension is stripped away totally and all the questions we would like to ask (Did they know him before? How did their wives feel?) are excluded. Instead, the writer offers a purely theological reading of the call, which profiles the authority of Jesus and the corresponding obedience of the disciples. The two stories follow the same structure: he passed, he saw, he called, they left, they followed. Naturally, behind this theological outline, lies a complex human experience, but one which is not available to us from the texts. The disciples will eventually become part of the Twelve, that symbolic number of the tribes, as a prophetic gesture to express



Jesus' own understanding that in him God was restoring Israel to himself.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Looking mainly at the proclamation story, there is a considerable background in the Old Testament to the words used here.

Good News

The background to this expression lies in Isaiah 52:7-12 and 61:1-4. It refers to a new eschatological (end-time) era of salvation to be established by God. In Isaiah, it is a verb rather than a noun.

Kingdom of God

It probably comes as a surprise to the general reader that the full expression “kingdom of God” is found nowhere in the Hebrew Bible (it does occur once in the Wisdom of Solomon 10:10, written in Greek). God as “king” is widely present in the Old Testament, of course, as indeed is the mention of “his kingdom”. The book of Daniel gives a special profile to the future kingdom, which God will inaugurate (Daniel 7 is the key text). From the time of Daniel onwards, many Jews cherished a hope that God would eventually intervene and establish his kingdom, in justice and peace. This future vision of God's justice and peace lies behind the proclamation of Jesus.

Thought for the day

The journey of life inevitably brings up the question what should I be, who should I become? Is life a maze or a labyrinth, that is, does all the effort lead somewhere, is there a goal? How will I be as a spouse, a parent, a partner, a church member? Within the Christian project, do I feel myself called to “activate” my baptism is some particular ministry or contribution? Such discernment will take in the grateful acknowledgement of my gifts as well as an examination of my inner generosity of spirit. In reality, we are all called by the Lord to build up the body of Christ. It is not a question of *if* but rather of *how*!

Prayer

God of surprises, take me by surprise once more and let me see how my special gifts could be part of your project of the Kingdom of God.

Repent

Behind the NT word *metanoia* (repentance or better conversion) lies the Old Testament word *shuv*, literally to come back, to return. As a metaphor or a change of heart, it implies turning from sin to righteousness, in a mood of sorrow for immoral behaviour. You can see this in the case of Solomon in 1 Kings 8:46. The word *shuv* is used also for turning away from idolatry to true worship of the Lord, as in Isaiah 1:10-17; Ezekiel 14:6; 18:30 and Amos 4:6-11). God meets this change of heart with forgiveness and restoration.

Calling

So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was ploughing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he

boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant. (1Kings 19:19–21)

KIND OF WRITING

The first passage is a kind of epitome, that is, the presentation of the essential features of the teaching. The second passage is an anecdote capturing the “needful”, by word and deed. There are two very similar anecdotes here.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

In Mark’s Gospel, the Good News is the motor behind the ministry and proclamation of Jesus (Mark 1:1, 14-15; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15, 20). Jesus regularly illustrates this Good News in stories of healings, offers of forgiveness, exorcisms and in general in his inclusion of the excluded, such as tax gatherers, prostitutes and, sometimes, foreigners. In Mark, Jesus uses a special word for time (*kairos*), meaning not chronological time, but eventful time, a historic offer. The word does come back in the Gospel (Mark 1:15; 10:30; 11:13; 12:2; 13:33). Kingdom of God is very regular in this Gospel (Mark 1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; 9:1, 47; 10:14-15, 23-25; 12:34; 14:25; 15:43). The invitation to convert returns only once in Mark 6:12.

ST PAUL

“You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to de-

stroy.” And they glorified God because of me.” (Galatians 1:13-24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 Jesus was a disciple of John and his own ministry starts only after the arrest of John, when the stage is cleared, so to speak. This is fairly different to what we find in the Gospel of John, in which the ministries of John and Jesus overlap. The word arrested means “handed over”, the term also used for Jesus’ passion. John’s destiny prefigures that of Jesus. Proclaiming is a technical term, meaning *effective* proclamation.

Verse 15 Jesus declares that the Kingdom God *has drawn* near. Unlike the other two Synoptic gospels, he never claims it has arrived in the present. The feeling of end-time carries with the sense that something of ultimate significance for human history is unfolding, right now. Repent = convert, in the sense of changing the way you look at the world. Believe the good news = have faith in this God. Often reduced to good advice, the good news is meant to be precisely that *news*. Cf. “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” (Mark 2:21–22)

Verse 16 Unlike in John 1, Simon and his brother are called first. Their job suggests the metaphor of “fishers of men” (using an older translation). The family owns a business and house, so not the poorest of the poor. As usual, Jesus himself takes the initiative—they do not present themselves.

Verse 17 “Follow me” is a command unique to Jesus and can be shown to go back to him historically. In Mark, these are the first words of Jesus to someone and so have special significance. At the time, fishing had connotations different from today. In the Bible, it could refer to catch, in the sense of harvest and so there judgement. In the wider culture, it meant teaching. In neither case is the primary emphasis on getting more people “in.”

Verse 18 “Immediately” is typical of the breathless style of Mark and also serves to illustrate his theology of call: it invites an unequivocal response, holding nothing back.

Verse 19 The second call story is very like the first. There is an echo of the call

stories of the prophets, for example Is 6:1-8; 41:9; 42:6. The initiative lies with Jesus. The Greek for call (*kaleō*) is related to the word for assembly or church (*ekklēsia*), the gathering of *the called*.

Verse 20 Again, an unconditional yes, marked by the abandonment of their livelihood. The information that they had employees suggests that at least these disciples were not the poorest. The biblical text behind this verse tells the story of Elijah calling Elisha. See above under Old Testament background.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. “The time is fulfilled” – this is a decisive moment in the life of Jesus. His public ministry is about to begin. Recall turning points in your own life when something new happened and with hindsight you can say the time was ripe for it to happen, “the time was fulfilled”.

2. “Repent and believe the good news”. Jesus called for a change of heart, as a response to the good news of the gospel message. A new level of faith in yourself leads to a new way of seeing yourself. A new way of understanding God leads to a conversion in how we relate to God, a change of heart. A growth in awareness of who we are can lead us to a new level of self-confidence, another change of heart. Can you recall times when “good news” led you to a change of heart.

3. The Spirit of God who was at work in Jesus calling the disciples continues to work in our day and in our lives. That is why the gospel message is one of good news. In the everyday events of our own lives we can see the grace of God at work. When have you had what you would consider a “call experience” that led you to a different style of life? Who was the “Jesus person” through whom the call came to you? To whom have you been a “Jesus person” in this way?

PRAYER

Your sovereign rule, O God, draws near to us in the person of Jesus your Son.

Your word summons us to faith; your power transforms our lives. Free us to follow in Christ’s footsteps so that neither human loyalty nor earthly attachment may hold us back from answering your call.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

The present form of this world is passing away

1 Cor 7:29 I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, 30 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, 31 and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is a marvellously paradoxical reading, in the classical tradition of spirituality, prophecy and apocalyptic. It promotes a worldview very different from contemporary attitudes, then *and now*. In its stark proposal of alternatives, some of the advice seems impossible (e.g. not to mourn) and some it will challenge directly the consumerism, so pronounced in the frenetic run-up to the birth of Jesus.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

At least some in the Corinthians communities wrote to Paul with specific questions on a range of issues: 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1. Then as now, social-embedded practices and attitudes were challenged by the values and vision of the faith.

KIND OF WRITING

The whole letter is framed by the cross (ch. 1-4) and the resurrection (15). After the opening four chapters, the letter continues with further teaching on how the community of faith distinguishes itself from the world “outside.” Once these basic positions have been identified, it is time to address the specific issues.

The whole of chapter 7 is devoted to marriage and sexuality (the term is modern). Within the community there is range of positions, sometimes expressed in slogans (e.g. 7:1). Earlier, Paul had advised the Christians to avoid immoral persons (*pornoi* in 5:9, 11) but some in the community have taken the advice to extremes, probably motivated by Paul’s own exemplary celibacy.

Plan of the chapter

- v. 1 Introduction
- vv. 2-7 Husbands and wives

- vv. 8-9 Widows and widowers
- vv. 10-11 Option of divorce
- vv. 12-16 Marriage with unbelievers
- vv. 17-24 Indifferent matters (*adiaphora*)
- vv. 25-28 Council for the unmarried
- vv. 29-35 *Living eschatologically*
- vv. 36-38 Engaged, not yet married
- vv. 39-40 The remarriage of widows

Our excerpt comes from a digression on living eschatologically. Today, we have the first three verses and next Sunday the remaining four. As always, the context for Paul is apocalyptic, that is, God is about to complete the restoration of creation, having started with the resurrection of Jesus. Although his personal preferences are clear, his teaching is “to remain as you are” (7:20, 24, 38, 40) precisely because it will all come to an end soon. The traditional “already” and “not yet” is further nuanced here by living “as if not.” The ultimate goal is pastoral, the keep cares and anxieties to a minimum and to promote devotion to God. There is an implied frame: “the time is short” and “the present form is passing away.”

RELATED PASSAGES

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. (1Thessalonians 5:23–24)

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:11–14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 29 Paul states his worldview at the start. Because the time (*kairos*) is short, believers have a different set of values and a critical relationship to the world and its values. The examples given are remarkably undeveloped, without

any specification as to how to live “as if not.” This attitude was also recommended by the popular Stoic philosophers, as way of protecting yourself from both fate and life’s “events.” The difference however is great. Paul is not recommending a spiritual withdrawal but a critical, free involvement.

The examples are slightly more vague in the Greek because Paul uses present participles (not finite verbs). The core is this: do not overvalue marriage, happiness and sadness, possessions, business (all by way of illustration). Do not confuse what is passing with what is truly important.

Verse 30 The list is meant as an illustration. Do not be overwhelmed by sadness or numbed by distractions. Two related passages come to mind: *so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope* (1Thessalonians 4:13) and *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice* (Philippians 4:4).

Verse 31 This is the widest possible group—no one is excluded! The form of the world—lit. the *schēma*—means patterns and values of this world, not its outward appearance but rather its essence. It is contrasted with another form—the *euschēma*—of v.35 “good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.”

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the pressing realities of existence. Can I identify this in myself? The main symptom is disproportion and key evidence is time / energy devoted to whatever it is.
2. Of course we have to deal with “the world,” but believers have a world view which gives us critical distance and helps us to remain free in ourselves. Are there specific issues in my life where I find myself “negotiating” between the two sets of values?
3. For different reasons, we are aware of the fragility of our world today. We are anxious about the harm done to the environment by energy consumption and so forth. Does this lead to any different actions on my behalf?

PRAYER

O God, often we are overwhelmed by life, our lives shadowed by anxiety. Help us to choose the values by which we may live according to the Gospel vision and be free from worries and from unnecessary attachments. Give us the peace which comes from Christ, who is our peace and lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.

And the people of Nineveh believed God

Jonah 3:1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. 10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Book of Jonah is one of the rare comic books of the Bible. The style is ironic and the message is presented satirically. That there is something “up” is apparent from the first line of our reading—God had to send Jonah a second time. The natural question is, why was that necessary? While the reading is clearly chosen to match the “straight” proclamation of repentance in the Gospel, something of the comic tone can be picked up from the missing vv. 6-9. Why dumb animals might need to repent is not pursued (they do come back at the end, on the lips of God)!

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Jonah is a short book, coming in at just forty-eight verses, eight of them in poetry and the rest in poetic prose. It is difficult to date. A common opinion is that it was written about the time of the post-Exilic reconstruction, perhaps in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. One of the religious responses to the return from the Exile was a narrow-minded nationalism. The book of Jonah undermines such ethno-centricity by presenting a prophet sent to foreigners, who is successful and who ironically regrets the success of his preaching. The picture of Jonah sitting down, waiting for the fireworks to begin, tends to stay in the memory!

There are two main sections:

Jonah 1-2 The prophet fails to escape God. *Jonah 3-4* The prophet successfully

preaches and is very, very disappointed.

KIND OF WRITING

The genre of the book of Jonah is much discussed. The benefits of such discussion are that different dimensions of the book are noticed. It has been proposed to read it as a parable. There may be some merit in this, but the point of comparison is hard to spot. The readiness of the Ninevites against the implied reluctance of Israelites? More successful is the category of satire and the book is certainly satirical. The reluctant prophet goes to comic lengths to escape his calling and an equally insistent God has a bit of fun with the big fish. The “prayer” of Jonah is a mishmash of Psalms material, a kind of mock prayer. God’s final speech is surely ironic and satirical in 4:10-11.

Nevertheless, it can be challenging to establish the targets of the satire. The book is, however, in dialogue with central biblical traditions about God, full of kindness and compassion, slow to anger and rich in mercy. This has led some writers to categorise it as midrash, a kind of ruminating rewriting and reflection. Satirical novella / midrash may capture it. There is no need to be definitive. It suffices to notice that this very short yet sophisticated book is packed with “stuff” and well worth investigating.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Ex 33:19; cf. 34:6-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The opening is a classical introduction to a prophet: “the word of the Lord came to X”. This second time Jonah accepts God’s invitation to proclaim the word.

Verse 2 Why Nineveh? A negative image of the city emerges in Tobit and in Judith. It was destroyed in 618 bc and perhaps its being already a ruin added piquancy to the prediction of Jonah. The “great city” is literally in Hebrew a “large city of God”, an ironic anticipation of the citizens’ response precisely to

God.

Verse 3 No city in antiquity took three days to cross, so perhaps the meaning is that it took three days to get there.

Verse 4 The wording of Jonah echoes the classical biblical story of destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Cf. *Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.* (Gen 19:24–26). However, there is also a level of irony, because “overthrown” could also mean “turns over”, i.e. repents. Cf. Then the spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person. (1 Sam 10:6) Jonah says more than he means, because this what will happen! At the same time, Jonah does not appeal for repentance unlike other prophets.

Verse 5 Two of the classical marks of repentance are undertaken by the citizens and the animals. The third mark, ashes, is found in the omitted v.6.

Verse 10 A very complete report of repentance acts as a preface to God’s changing the divine mind. The reader is given this information, but not Jonah, which leads to the serious slapstick that brings the book to a climax in chapter 4.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Reflect for a moment on your own experience of conversion / repentance. When did you feel first called to conversion of heart? What was your reaction? How are things at present? Prayer of growth and change.

2. To believe can be very practical because it influences not only internal values but also the choices I make in life. How detectable is my faith in my values and lifestyle? Prayer of discernment and direction.

3. What is my own experience of God, full of compassion and kindness, slow to anger and rich in mercy? A prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

PRAYER

God of all growth, you love us enough to call us to conversion that we might live by the Good News. Let us not be afraid to hear your voice, even when you must speak to us more than once! Send your Spirit into our hearts, who will put a new right spirit within us, that we follow the way traced for us by Jesus Christ. Amen

THE LITURGY

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 24(25); 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading from Jonah is taken “straight” in order to match the Jesus proclamation of repentance or conversion (a better translation of *metanoia*). The response of the Ninevites—faith—anticipates Jesus’ invitation to believe the good news.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The whole of Psalm 25 (24) is a suitable prayer of repentance. It is an acrostic or alphabetical psalm. These tend to be a little forced and so the line of argument is not so clear.

Very clear however is the focus on the desire of the sinner for God’s guidance. Other verses in the Psalm portray God’s mercy and compassion.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The book of Jonah was written when religion tended to be closed to outsiders and Gentiles. In response, this short story has a surprise: an unwilling Jewish prophet preaches with spectacular success to people outside the faith. Two changes follow.

Second reading

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

This very short reading is provocative. If all we say about Jesus is true, if we really believe the alternative vision of the Gospel, what difference could it, or would it make?

Gospel

Mark 1:14-20

Every so often, we need to touch base with the important people and values in our lives. In today’s gospel we touch base with the founding proclamation of Jesus. All sorts of question arise. What did he mean by “believe”? by “Good News”? And most important, by “repent”?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Mon 26 Jan *Sts Timothy and Titus*

2 Timothy 1:1-8

These days it would be easy to be “ashamed” of the good news, but the writer encourages a more authentic attitude. What steps will I take to fan into a flame the gift of faith?

Tuesday 27 January *St Angela Merici*

Hebrews 10:1-10

The blood offerings of the Temple are replaced by Jesus’ offering of his obedience and faithfulness. In this reading we see an important reception of Jesus’ own faithfulness towards his Abba.

Wednesday 28 Jan *St Thomas Aquinas*

Hebrews 10:11-18

One of the ways in which Jesus’ offering surpasses Temple sacrifice is that his offering does not need to be repeated: it was once for all. His offering does not need to be repeated because it was both spiritual (not external) and complete (not partial).

Thursday 29 January

Hebrews 10:19-25

In today’s reading we are invited to follow the example of Jesus in giving himself. The blood here is not to be understood as a payment but rather stands for the whole person of Jesus. Just as he paved the way wholeheartedly, we are called to a no less wholehearted response.

Friday 30 January *St Aidan*

Hebrews 10:32-39

When others fall away, it can be tempting to copy our contemporaries. But, says the writer, remember that all who went before us suffered too for the faith. Discipleship is no cheap grace.

Saturday 31 January *St John Bosco*

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19

Our passage is a wonderful praise of faith. As we hear of the heroes of old, help up as examples, it is natural to find ourselves wondering about our own faith.

REFLECTIONS

Since we are witnesses of a communion beyond our vision and our limits, we are

called to wear God’s smile. Community is the first and most believable gospel that we can preach. We are asked to humanise our community. “Build friendship between yourselves, family life, love among you. May the monastery not be a Purgatory but a family. There are and there will be problems but like in a family, with love, search for a solution with love; do not destroy this to resolve that; do not enter competitions. Build community life, because in the life of a community it is this way, like a family, and it is the very Holy Spirit who is in the middle of the community. [...] And community life always with a big heart. Let things go, do not brag, be patient with everything, smile from the heart. And a sign of this is joy”.

Joy is confirmed in the experience of community, that theological space where each one is responsible for their fidelity to the Gospel and for the growth of all. When a community is fed by the same Body and Blood of Jesus, it gathers around the Son of God, to share the journey of faith, guided by the Word. It becomes one with him, together in communion, experiencing the gift of love and festive celebration in freedom and joy, full of courage.

In these days when fragmentation justifies widespread sterile individualism and when the weakness of relationships breaks up and ruins the care of the human person, we are invited to humanise community relationships, to encourage communion of heart and spirit in the Gospel sense, because “there is a communion of life among all those who belong to Christ. It is a communion that is born of faith” that makes “the Church, in her most profound truth, communion with God, intimacy with God, a communion of love with Christ and with the Father in the Holy Spirit, which extends to brotherly communion”.

