

Homily 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B (21.1.18)

'So our faces (& hearts) display Your likeness...'

You know the book of Jonah is an interesting book. Many would argue it's a parable, and a parable addressed to us, because Jonah, the reluctant missionary reflects a lot of our attitudes too, especially to mission, and outreach. What we haven't got in that story is that long before these events, when Jonah was summoned by God to go and get the Ninevites to repent - he ran away. Some people would say he ran away because of the fear of being sent to Assyria because the Assyrians had been a fierce people, and they'd invaded Israel, and killed loads of people, and pillaged whole families, and so were hated by the Israel and other peoples -so, Jonah wasn't so much afraid as resentful- although I'm sure there was a little fear as well. He would have thought - why should God outreach to these people who'd been so awful to the people of God, and persecuted them?

He didn't want to do hear the Lord's request. He in fact, he even said,  
"Send someone else."

So he runs away, of course, and everybody knows the story. Jonah gets cast overboard from a boat, and is swallowed by a big fish, and subsequently spewed up on dry land.

Then this is when God says to him,

"Now, go and do what I told you to do."

But Jonah is really, I don't like to say this, but he's really quite an 'ugly' person. I don't mean in looks. First of all, he's resentful that he's being sent to a people he despised and hated, and when he does preach, he's really looking forward to fire and brimstone coming down on the Ninevites from heaven, and blasting Nineveh off the face of the earth. But this did not happen. We are told instead -

"The Ninevites repented, they believed in God and changed their ways."

When God didn't fulfill the prophecy/wishes of Jonah, Jonah was absolutely miffed off. He went off into the desert, and sat under a bush and wished he were dead. Yet his mission had worked, but not in the way Jonah wanted.

Jonah wanted revenge for what the Ninevites had done to his people. That reminds me very much of what I am like at times, I don't know about you. It's the ugliness in us that makes us unable to see beyond our own boundaries. We do tend to think of some people as enemies, and we would rather wish revenge on them, than a change of heart in them, or an openness in us to them. This belligerent attitude is in stark contrast to Jesus and His mission. In contrast to Jonah, Jesus is not 'ugly' - Jesus is very attractive, and I don't mean in looks because I haven't seen the historical Jesus who walked upon this earth. Jesus is attractive in His personality and teaching. That is obvious from the opening words of today's gospel, because the people He summoned left everything and followed Him.

Those people had probably heard Him speak, but there was obviously something very attractive and electric - magnetic about His character, as well as His preaching. We know from the scriptures themselves - "This is a teaching with authority behind it." People wanted to be part of His mission. Jesus started with the bedrock of faith, the Church of the day if you like, but He was also open to a universal mission. Think of the people He encountered, like the Canaanite woman, the Centurion and so on.

Jesus wasn't just 'nice' but challenging. He challenged the Canaanites, who were also despised. He challenged the Canaanite woman to see if she was just after a wonder cure or whether she had real faith. When He way saw her faith, He said, "Let this be done for you."

So Jesus is the generous missionary. He can see beyond the boundaries of the Church. He can see beyond the boundaries of a state or a nation. He can see beyond the boundaries of race and culture - that's something I find very hard to do, I don't know about you. I find it very hard to look beyond some boundaries. Today's readings are given to us to remind us that, we are mainly like Jonah, and that we we need to change to be more like Jesus - in our outreach, and our mission, and our evangelization, and our witness. The ingredient I think, that assists our mission, that gives us that 'edge' - is attractiveness! When people hear 'me' speak, when they see 'my' actions, when they see 'my' attitudes and views, do they see ugliness? Or do they see the face of Jesus - something that's attractive - something that others would very much like a slice of?