

Fr. Tim Ralston – Homily for January 22, 2012

Today, our first reading presents to us the story of the prophet Jonah. Rather, it gives us a part of that story. It tells us how the word of the Lord came to Jonah, telling him to go to Nineveh and preach God's message to the people there. The reading then tells us that Jonah did as the Lord asked and went to the people of Nineveh.

And as I thought about this reading in preparing this homily, I thought to myself, "Jonah must have been one of the greatest preachers ever." Think about it. Jonah is sent to Nineveh, which was a very large city, to preach repentance.

Now, what we didn't hear in the reading is what happened both before and after Jonah's traveling to Nineveh. We didn't hear how Jonah didn't want to do it, he didn't want to go to Nineveh. God asked him to do so once, and Jonah actually went in the opposite direction instead. Our passage today is the Lord's second time calling Jonah.

And we see later in the book of Jonah that the reason he didn't want to preach to the people of Nineveh was because he knew God would be merciful to them. Jonah didn't want this. Rather, Jonah wanted God to punish the people of Nineveh. He actually became angry when they repented and the Lord chose not to punish them.

He did not want them to repent. So, even when he went to preach, he probably wasn't pulling out his "A" material. He wasn't using his best rhetorical skills or warming up the crowd by telling a joke or two. Instead, Jonah simply said, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed." And this worked. The people of Nineveh heard this, repented, fasted and put on sackcloth. So, it seemed that even Jonah's lackluster effort was better than most preachers could ever hope for. I know that I often wish I could have the same success in preaching repentance to others.

Now as I thought about this more, I realized that it probably wasn't because of Jonah's persuasive speech that the people repented. But rather, it was the power of the Word of God. The reading tells us that the people of Nineveh believed God. It doesn't say that they believed Jonah. Jonah was just proclaiming the message that God had given him to proclaim. Nothing else. He didn't add or subtract anything from it. And the people knew that they were hearing the Word of God. That Word was powerful enough to bring an entire city to repentance.

But even after using the preaching of Jonah to bring about this great repentance and conversion by the Ninevites, God wasn't quite finished. There was still another person who needed conversion, and that was Jonah himself. And the book of Jonah concludes with the Lord showing Jonah the error of his ways and of his thinking.

This is an important reminder for us all. For we know that the word of the Lord comes to us as well. We also know that God calls us to go forth and to take that word and share it with others. This might mean sharing God's word of love to someone who is hurting due to a severe illness. This might mean sharing God's word of peace to with a friend struggling to forgive another. This might mean sharing the word of hope with classmates feeling lost or scared. This might mean traveling to Washington DC to share the word of life with a nation that allows its own children to be needlessly destroyed.

In short, it means sharing the word of God to those who need to hear it. And this is something we are all called to do. But as we're going out trying to change the world and save others, we need to trust, not in our own abilities and efforts, but rather, in the power of the word of God. And as we witness what that power can and will do in the lives of others, we need to ask ourselves an ever-important question.

What can the power of God's Word do for us? It can transform our prayer lives, draw us ever closer to the heart of God and lead us to greater service of Him and of His people. God's Word can heal us, can bring us joy and can provide direction when we feel lost or frustrated. A Word from God can renew our energy, give us greater hope or encourage us to continue on the path that God has given us to follow. God's word can lead us to true repentance, to true on-going, life-long conversion.

So, let us listen for that powerful, life-changing Word coming from the lips of God. And let us go where the Lord sends us, and follow where He leads us. As we share His word with others, we will see the power of the Word of God convert hearts and change lives. Hopefully, our hearts and our lives will be among those changed.