

**Third Sunday Year B**  
**Jonah 3, I Cor 7, Mark 1**  
**Fr Peter Groves**

This morning's readings confront us with the challenge of being called. In the case of the epistle, rather surprisingly so, since the excerpt we were given tells us that, since time is so short, men with wives ought to behave as if they don't have them. If one didn't already know that catholic Christendom is largely run by unmarried men, that particular piece of Biblical translation is the sort of thing which would provide a fairly obvious clue.

Wives, and what to do with them, are also important to the background of the book of Jonah. In its historical context it is chiefly a piece of satire. After the Israelites returned from Exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC, after the rebuilding of the temple and the re-establishment of their sacrificial worship, there was a strong nationalistic movement which sought to purify Hebrew religion from any foreign influence. The

idea was that God's chosen people were holy – set apart – and should not adulterate themselves with those of other race or creed. They were to put aside all foreign wives, for example. The Samaritans, those who had come down from the northern capital Samaria when it was destroyed two hundred years before, were shoved away to offer their own sacrifices in a different place.

Now clearly not everyone thought this religious nationalism a good idea. The book of Jonah tells us this, because it is a short comic drama in which the only character who has no idea about God and his universal love, the only character who does not obey God instantly and behave as though it were unthinkable for any nation to follow anything other than the God of Israel, the only stupid character is Jonah, the Israelite prophet.

He is told to go to the great city of Nineveh and tell the people to repent. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, the centrepiece of the nation who

had fought so tirelessly and effectively against Israel and Judah, the nation whose many conquests we read about in the Books of Kings and Chronicles. Telling Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell them of the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is rather like telling someone to go to Mecca during Ramadan and run through the streets shouting about the need to turn to Jesus Christ.

Jonah has a problem with God's call. If he preaches and they repent, then God will forgive them. And Jonah doesn't want God to forgive them, because they don't deserve it. So he runs away and finds a boat that will take him far from the Lord's governance. Or so he thinks. The Lord sends a storm, and the sailors cry to their gods to no avail. They entreat Jonah to do the same, but when he tells them he is a Hebrew, worshipping the God who made heaven and earth, the pagan sailors are distraught. How could Jonah have been so stupid as to think he could escape the Lord's will? Jonah volunteers to be pitched over the side, to save the boat. When he's gone, the writer goes out of

his way to tell us that these foreign sailors suddenly fear Israel's God greatly, and offer prayer and sacrifice to the Lord.

Then, as we know, Jonah prays, the Lord sends a sea monster, and it carries him to dry land. So with little alternative, Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach his message. Nineveh is huge – sixty miles wide, or so. But after Jonah has gone only a little way, shouting out about the Lord the God of Israel, all the Assyrians have repented in sackcloth and ashes. And not only the ordinary city dwellers, but the King of Nineveh himself proclaims a fast and tears his clothes.

Jonah is a bit of a miserable old thing, and he stomps out of the city, saying to the Lord – “you see – I told you. They've repented. And now you'll forgive them.” The Lord demonstrates to Jonah his folly by giving him a plant to shade his head, and taking it away again so that Jonah throws yet another tantrum, responding to the Lord's questions “Do you do well to

be angry over the plant” with a wonderfully wilful “Yes I do” – one can almost see him stamping his foot.

The reason this story is so effective is because it is funny. Jonah, the prophet, sulks his way around because the Lord seems determined to love people who aren't from Judah. How very unreasonable of him. So every situation is turned on its head, and the one who should be God's servant defies his commands, and those who are supposed to be ignorant of the Lord are seen to be highly god fearing. Jonah is the one who runs away from the love of God.

How often have we whined the words “It's not fair”. What's fair, we think, is what makes sense to us - and more often than not it's what suits us rather than what suits others.

The call of Jesus which the disciples hear early in Mark's gospel is undoubtedly urgent. It is also, in many ways, unfair, that is to say it isn't concerned with conformity to human ideas of justice, with pay

back for those who haven't done what they ought. There is no argument or debate which persuades them or us of our own self centredness and stupidity. All there is is the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ, calling upon us to repent. It's a characteristic of Greek that commands can have different implications according to their grammatical expression, and here the call to repent is not a call to a one off change of mind, but to a way of life: repent, and go on repenting, believe and go on believing, is what Jesus is saying to all at this, the beginning of his ministry. Our problem is that, like Jonah, we are afraid of the love of God and the way in which it seems to threaten our selfishness. It seems that we know what the Lord requires of us, we know what our loving father has done and will do, and we - the self assured Pharisee trumpeting our prayers on the street corner - we don't like it.

It's not fair. How all too human to be all too childish. The greater God's love, the greater the unfairness, the louder our foot-stamping and cries of dissent. And of

course, like any loving father, God knows his own. If the call to repent were enough for us then this, the beginning of Jesus ministry, would be the end of it. But no. The turning, the ongoing change of mind and heart to which Jesus calls us, is not a snap of the fingers. It's something continuous, a drama, a journey which each of us must make. So it is that the gospels, beginning with Mark, show Jesus on his own journey, walking the path before us, showing the way in which we must follow, and placing, at its end and as our goal, the signpost, the marker, of our destination. A city, a hillside, and a cross.