**Homily for the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B**

**January 24, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (Jonah preaches repentance to the Ninevites.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 25 (Teach me your ways, O Lord.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 (The world in its present form is passing away.)*

*Gospel: Mark 1:14-20 (They abandoned their nets and followed him.)*

In some ways, today’s first reading and gospel seem like a repeat of last Sunday. Last week we heard about the call of the Prophet Samuel; this week it’s the Prophet Jonah instead. Last week we saw how the Gospel of John described Jesus’ first encounter with some of the men who would become his apostles. This week we see how the Gospel of Mark describes those first encounters. But, that’s where the similarities end. Last week, both readings emphasized the need to *know* the Lord first in order to commit to him. Samuel, though he was very pious and happy to be serving in the Lord’s Temple, could not recognize who was calling him, because the Lord had not yet revealed himself to the young man. Once he did, Samuel could grow into the great prophet that the Lord wanted him to be. Likewise, those two disciples of John the Baptist didn’t know what to make of Jesus at first. They needed to “come and see” what he was like. Only then could they confidently follow him and invite others to join them.

Mark’s version of events is completely different. Jesus just walks right up to Simon and Andrew, then to James and John, and says, “Follow me.” Without hesitation, they drop everything and do as he says. How odd! Mark provides no explanation for why these fishermen would respond to Jesus that way. Had they heard him preach? Had they witnessed his miracles? How did they know Jesus before this encounter on the seashore? We have no idea. The fact that Mark doesn’t seem to care about their prior relationship with Jesus suggests that this story may not be about *vocation* at all. Rather, it could be about how Christian disciples of today should respond to Jesus *whenever* he calls us to do something. *Discernment* is supposed to be slow and deliberate, like the disciples who wanted to hang out with Jesus for several hours, to size him up and understand what he was about, before committing to him. *Discipleship*, on the other hand, is supposed to be immediate and wholehearted, like these fishermen who abandon their nets and never look back.

The story of Jonah brings out another important aspect of discipleship, which is sometimes overlooked, namely, the need to conform our own will to God’s will. Unfortunately, the brief excerpt that we heard today doesn’t convey that message. Instead, it focuses more on the *central* message of the Book – that God prefers to *reconcile* Israel with its enemies, rather than *destroying* those enemies. Jonah, on the other hand, would prefer that God *punish* the Ninevites, not pardon them. So, when God first calls Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, Jonah runs the other way, hops on a boat, and tries to escape. Of course, that doesn’t work. God sends a powerful storm, which nearly capsizes the boat. And, when the people aboard the vessel find out that Jonah is the reason why they are on the verge of drowning, they toss him overboard, where he’s swallowed by a “great fish.” Three days later, after the fish spits out Jonah on the seashore, God speaks to him again, saying, “Now go to Nineveh and preach, as I commanded you.” So, Jonah goes, and preaches, and quickly brings the entire city to repentance. All the Ninevites, great and small, humble themselves before God, and God grants them mercy.

That’s the end of today’s *reading*, but not the end of the story. *God’s will* is done; the sinners in Nineveh repent and receive mercy. But, *Jonah’s will* is not done. He is angry with the Lord. In fact, the Book of Jonah ends with him complaining to God and saying that this is why he didn’t want to go to Nineveh in the first place. He *knew* that the Lord would be merciful to these enemies of Israel, and Jonah *did not want that*. Even after obeying God and doing what he was sent to do, Jonah still refused to conform his will to God’s will. Therein lies a warning for all of us, who might think that obedience to God and to the Church is just a matter of doing what we are told. Jonah obeyed the Lord, but he was gritting his teeth and harboring resentment in his heart the whole time. Many Christians do the same, and that is not *true* obedience nor true discipleship.

As Pastors like me look around at our sparsely populated churches these days, many of us wonder how many people are staying home out of a legitimate concern for their health and safety, and how many people are simply relieved that they don’t have to go to church anymore. To be sure, many people genuinely yearn to come back, and they will do so joyfully as soon as the danger has passed. But, I suspect that lots of other folks who are skipping Mass these days are going other places and attending other events that pose a much higher risk than being in this worship space for an hour or less. With no *obligation* to be here, they can now spend their weekends however they please. When the Sunday obligation is imposed on them again, many will no-doubt return. I just hope that they don’t come back to church with the same attitude with which Jonah went to Nineveh, saying, “I’ll go because I *have* to, not because I *want* to.”

We regular church-goers tend to be a pretty obedient lot. We’re accustomed to following rules and norms of behavior, even if we don’t necessarily agree with all of them. Like Jonah, we may do what the Lord asks of us, but with a bit of resentment and self-pity. The challenge of Christian discipleship is not just to do what the Lord says, but to conform our lives *and our wills* to those of Christ. Disciples should want to become like their Master in all things. So, we should not be content only to conform our *behavior* to Jesus’ teachings. We should also want those teachings and his personal example to become deeply ingrained in us, so that in all circumstances, there will be no distinction between our will and God’s will. When that is the case, we can react with the same wholehearted immediacy of those fishermen on the seashore, who abandoned their nets and followed Jesus. When we consistently desire what God desires, life becomes so much easier! We rarely need to wrestle with our conscience or discern anything, really, for what is good and just in the sight of God seems obvious and instinctive. That’s the sort of freedom that comes from *true obedience* – when God’s will and our will become one – and from *true discipleship* – when our first and greatest desire is simply to follow the Lord.