

3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B  
FROM A KNOWN PAST TO AN UNKNOWN FUTURE

*“Follow Me and I will make you into fishers of men.’ And once they left their nets and followed Him” (Mk. 1: 17-18)*

***Calling and response, which was the predominant themes last week continue to dominate our thoughts this 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B.*** This is quite significant as we celebrate today, The Sunday of the Word of God, inaugurated by Pope Francis on November 30, 2019, in the Apostolic Letter *Motu proprio Aperuit illis*. This special celebration offers us the opportunity to reflect deeply on our relationship with God through His spoken Word in the Scriptures. God continues to speak to us in different ways, but even more clearly in the Scriptures. Therefore, we must devote quality time encountering God in His Word, and His Son, Jesus Christ in the Gospels. When we can develop the love for the Word of God, it becomes easier for us to live it daily, thus making the Word incarnate in us. The critical point is that to live out the Word; we must know the Word; for no one lives out to the full what he does not know. As Catholics, the Eucharist presents ample instances for us to listen to God. The priest, acting in the name and person of Christ, represents God among His people: speaking His Word and offering the sacrifice of His Son.

***The opening words of the First Reading (Jonah 3: 1-5, 10),*** “The Word of the Lord was addressed to Jonah.” These words resonate what we celebrate today, and further reiterates the importance of listening to God, Who continues to speak today. Jonah here personifies each of us on the journey of redemption and salvation. By our baptism, which incorporates us into Christ and makes us children of God, we become Christ’s witnesses, sharing in His three-fold ministry of prophet, priest and king. Ipso facto, we, like Jonah, we are called and sent on a mission. It was difficult it was for Jonah to finally do God’s bidding. His attempt at escaping ended up in the belly of a fish for three days, and he finally berthed at the shore of the city he was running from. Sometimes the Word of God and its demands can be so hard to abide by, that we struggle for an escape route laced with excuses and rationalizations. Jonah’s realization that his escape attempt was a futile and inadvertent trip to his destination, teaches us that we can never run away from God. And since we cannot run away, the option before us is voluntary obedience. Exactly what Jonah did here, and it paid off. When God calls, He gives us the grace to follow, if we are willing; and He blesses our mission with success. Jonah’s mission to Nineveh is one of the most successful missionary stories recorded in the bible.

His message was simple and short but with devastating outcomes: “Only days more, and Nineveh will be destroyed.” On hearing this, the people believed the prophet and took his words seriously. They proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least; including the king, who proclaimed fast across the entire city for humans, animals, plants, infants and the unborn (Jonah 3: 6-8). The response of the king and his people is quintessential, overwhelming and exemplary. God was impressed with His people: He “saw their efforts to renounce their evil behaviour. God relented: “He did not inflict on them the disaster which He had threatened” (Jonah 3: 10). There is no sin greater than God’s mercy when we listen to God’s Word, believe it and respond with love and in obedience. Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “God never tires of forgiving us; we are the one who tires of seeking His mercy.” The Word of God always calls for both attention and action.

***In the Gospel (Mk. 1: 14-20)***, the words of the prophet Jonah are reinvigorated by Jesus at the very beginning of His ministry: “The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News” (Mk. 1: 14). These words that opened a new historical chapter that would lead to the establishment of the New Kingdom and Covenant have three main components: the imminence of the Kingdom of God, the call to repentance and the need to believe the message of the Gospel. The Kingdom of God was very central to the ministry of Jesus. According to Joseph Ratzinger, “The phrase ‘Kingdom of God’ occurs 122 times in the New Testament as a whole; 99 of these passages are in the three synoptic Gospels, and 90 of these 99 reports the words of Jesus” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 2007: 47). The understanding of the “Kingdom of God” has been a subject of discourse over the centuries. For Origen, the “Kingdom of God” is not a thing or a place; it is Person of Christ Himself. The second idea is that the Kingdom of God is in the inner being of man. It is not an external or geographical location, but it is located in man’s inner being. It grows and radiates outward from the inner space. There is a third opinion that the Kingdom of God refers to the ecclesial community – the Church – gathering in faith. The fourth notion links the Kingdom of God with the Parousia - Christ’s Second Coming. This last opinion is popular among Christian folks of different denominations. Whichever way we understand it, the fact is that every tick of the clock is a reminder that we do not have much time left; and challenges us to act fast in responding and living out the principles of the Kingdom.

***Repentance is a crucial part of this spiritual revolution.*** From its Greek root *Metanoia*, Repentance means *a change of mind*. Therefore, to repent is to change one’s mind. It is not merely an expression of regret or to say sorry; but it is

an act that is very core, from the depth of one's heart. It is a turnaround in one's behaviour – an overall change. There is a story of St. Augustine, who after his conversion visited the city he lived in his youthful debauchery and one of the ladies who knew him very well then called out to him, but he would not respond. When she caught up with him, she said: "I have been calling, but you never looked." Augustine is said to have responded; "I am not the Augustine I used to be." By this, Augustine meant that he was a changed person, the same man with a completely different character. True repentance means becoming a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5: 17). Jesus puts it this way: "no one sews a piece of new cloth on an old cloak ... and no one puts new wine into old wineskins" otherwise the tear would be worse, and the skins would scatter and the wine lost (Mk. 2: 21-22).

***Jesus came to preach "Good News" (euagellion).*** The news He brings is good because it is a message of peace, hope, truth, comfort, promise, immortality, redemption and salvation. To believe the message, we have to believe in the Messenger as The Only Begotten Son of God, the Messiah, Who is our Lord and Saviour. It means to believe that all He says is true: that God is our Father, Who created us in His image; He is love and the fullness of compassion; that He is eternally good and unchanging; that He loved the world so much that He sacrificed His Only Son to save us all. It is to believe that despite all the changes before us, God remains the same; ever faithful to His Word.

***The call and the response of the first-four disciples of Jesus give us the praxis of the whole message of this Sunday.*** When each pair of the brothers heard the call of Jesus, they left everything and followed Him. They abandoned the old to embrace the new way of life; history to embrace mystery. Their faith is expressed in their eagerness and commitment to a mission they had no idea where it was leading. Did they understand what Jesus meant by making them "fishers of men"? Faith does not need understanding. It requires surrender.