

3rd Sunday B

Introduction

I'm happy finally to be here at St. Casimir's and to have an opportunity to offer a Sunday Mass. I'm in the process of visiting all 153 parishes of the Archdiocese for Sunday Mass and at last count I'm up to about 103 - so, in the words of the poet, Robert Frost, I have "miles to go before I sleep."

In case you don't know, St. Casimir's is known throughout the Archdiocese as a young and vibrant parish with a wonderful school, a parish community that is alive, active, and bright with promise. I'm delighted to be here at the beginning of Catholic Schools Week and I'm especially happy to know the school is running out of space, that's a problem I'm always happy to have! I'd also like to say a word of greeting to the Catholic War Veterans here today and to thank you for your brave and devoted service to our country and for defending our most cherished freedoms! So, I simply wanted to join you in prayer, to say a word of encouragement and to express our common debt of gratitude to you, Fr. Dennis, for your devoted service to this parish day in and day out!

Taking my cue from today's Scripture readings, I'd like to spend a few moments thinking with you about what happened to the first followers of Jesus in today's Gospel and what that means to your life and mine. To bring things into focus, I would say three things happened: First, they heard the message: repent and believe in the Gospel. Second, the messenger, namely, Jesus, called them. Third, they dropped everything and followed him. And, finally, I came today to say that the same three things have to happen to us. So that is where we're headed.

The Message and the Messenger

The clear message from Jonah and Jesus is: 'repent and believe.' Of course, the

message of repentance wasn't new. The Old Testament is filled with demands that God's people mend their ways. But Jonah, whom we met in the first reading, was different. He directed the message of repentance, not to the Jewish people but to the Assyrians living in the city of Nineveh, thought to be located in modern-day Iraq. We might say that, for the Jews, Nineveh represented the "secular culture" of the day. So we can see, even back then repentance was an equal opportunity annoyance (!)

But *Jesus'* message was also new. He summed it up this way: "The time of fulfillment is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel." The message he delivered wasn't a clever speech with sound bites. No, with apologies to Marshall McLuhan, Jesus is both the medium and the message. The medium is our humanity assumed in time by God's Eternal Son. The message is that, in Jesus, God has drawn unimaginably near to us. Now God doesn't merely have a voice but a face that reveals his love. In Jesus we discover how much God loves us and cares for us — He loves us with a love that is stronger than sin and more powerful than death. The messenger, Jesus, *is* the message; he is the Kingdom of God in the flesh. And he answers our deepest need to be loved infinitely and compassionately. A love like that is worth repenting for!

The Call and the Response

A love worth repenting for is also a love worth responding to, and that is exactly what the fishermen in the Gospel did when Jesus called them. When they first met Jesus these fishermen did not understand who he really was but they sensed something different, something deep, something attractive, so much so that they abandoned their nets, their boats, and their father to follow him, not just for a ten-day rabbinic seminar but for the rest of their lives.

The men Jesus called were no ordinary fishermen. The Gospel hints that they were reasonably successful as commercial fishermen. So they knew what kind of fish swam in the Sea of Galilee and where they were. They knew how to catch them and besides, they were hard workers. Jesus says, "Come after me and I will make you

fishers of men.” He used the art of fishing to introduce them to the art of attracting others to the Gospel, the art of evangelization. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Our Turn ...

Or is it? Roughly twenty centuries later we are gathered here at St. Casimir, still listening to the words of Jesus, “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” His words are not the distant echo of times long past but rather they are “words of spirit and life” (Psalm 19), as powerful and as personal as the day on which they were first spoken. They are not harsh words designed to make us miserable but an invitation from the Lord to be freed from whatever is going on in our lives that hinders us from opening our hearts to his truth and love. The word “repent” is an invitation to true freedom and lasting joy, even in the midst of a secular culture that sometimes marginalizes God.

Jesus invites us not merely to repent but also to believe, to encounter him in faith, to meet him in the pages of Scripture, to receive him into our hearts in the Eucharist, and to embrace him as “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Pope Francis constantly invites us to a renewed and living faith, a faith rooted in the person of Jesus ‘who loves us, who gave his life to save us, and, who is now living at our side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free us.’ (EG, 164) If we are convinced of this, then we will be ready to respond to Jesus call, “Come after me and I will make you fishers of men ...” in other words, I will teach you how to bear witness to me and spread the Gospel. And you may say, “I have a day job. I’m not a theologian. I’m not qualified for this.” But you know the Lord and you know the culture in which we’re all swimming. You know what kind of fish there are in this culture, where they can be found, and, in God’s grace, you are capable of offering them the attractiveness of the Gospel. St. John Paul II taught that the Church’s mission of evangelization is carried out mainly by the lay women and men, such as yourselves, and he was right!

Then, there’s part in the Gospel where the disciples immediately left everything and

went to follow Jesus. And you may say to me, “We’re just getting started. We’re settling down. We now have a family and our careers are just beginning to take off. Are we supposed to abandon all that and become itinerant preachers in Baltimore?” Of course, I’d love it, but I think St. Paul offers us wise advice in today’s 2nd reading. He tells us how to live in this passing world with our heart set on the world to come. He tells us not to imagine that life as we now know it is here to stay. Instead, in our daily work and activity we are to make the Gospel our first priority, such that we live not as people desperately hanging on to a good life but rather as people of hope who sense of a great love, a great joy, a deep truth right below the surface of life as we know it in the secular culture we’re all a part of.

If we take St. Paul’s advice by putting Christ first and by making worldly concerns secondary, we’ll soon find something wonderful happening in our lives as disciples of the Lord and members of his Church. By and by the gap between the message and ourselves will narrow. People will sense something distinctive about our lives just as the disciples long ago sensed something distinctive about Jesus. The message will be part of who we are, what we say and do, how we live. In a word we will identify with the message and messenger and thus become missionary disciples and witnesses to the Lord’s love.

Conclusion

Working side-by-side with you and with faithful Catholics throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore, it is my earnest hope and prayer to transform the Archdiocese from the inside out, such that we will not focus merely on internal problems and challenges but rather on being a missionary church, full of life, joy, and enthusiasm, undaunted because we are loved so deeply we can scarcely imagine it. May God bless us and keep us always in His love!