

Sunday 3.

Like last weekend, today's readings speak about God's calling us. Last week we learned about the call of the first disciples as John presents it in his Gospel. Today we see Mark's version of the same call. And today's second reading from 1 Corinthians reminds us that the Lord will return. St. Paul believed that this would happen very soon. Most of us don't believe that today. However, for each of us the Lord's coming to us can be very soon. Therefore we have to be prepared to meet the Lord when he calls us to himself.

But today's first reading from the Book of Jonah, even though it also speaks of God's call, presents this theme in a very different way. Let us look at it a little more closely. First of all, the book itself is not history, even though a prophet named Jonas is mentioned in the 2nd Book of Kings 14: 25. Rather, it is a story created to teach us something, and it does so by making Jonah an unwilling prophet, someone who is sent on a mission by God but doesn't want to go and runs away from the Lord to a city called Tarshish, a city somewhere in the far west.

Today's selection does not mention this part of the story, but you remember it. Jonah boards a ship to get to Tarshish. But there is a

terrible storm and the sailors cast lots to see who has caused this storm by displeasing God. The lot falls on Jonah who confesses to them what he is doing, running away from the job assigned to him by God. He begs them to throw him into the sea. They don't want to do that but eventually they have to because the storm is getting worse and everyone's life is in danger. Then God sends a large fish to swallow Jonah. In the belly of the great fish Jonas makes an act of faith in God's protection. The fish vomits him out on land. Now God commands him once again to go preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians, the enemies of his own people. This time Jonah obeys, and the people of Nineveh repent of their evil ways and God turns away the punishment he had in store for them.

But Jonah is so distressed by the fact that his enemies have escaped divine punishment through their repentance that he now asks God to take his life, and again he goes away, this time to the east.

There he builds himself a hut and waits to see what will happen.

Now in one night God causes a gourd plant to grow up over the hut to give Jonah protection from the sun. But the next morning God sends a worm to attack the plant and it dies. Jonah is furious. Then God says to him: "Have you reason to be angry over the plant?" "I have reason to be angry," Jonah answered, "angry enough to die."

Then the Lord says to him: “You are concerned over the plant which cost you no labor and which you did not raise; it came up in one night and in one night it perished. And should I not be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot distinguish their right hand from their left, not to mention the many cattle?” And that is the end of the Book of Jonah.

Did you know that there is a difference in the number of books recognized by Catholic and those recognized by Jews and Protestants as belonging to the Sacred Scriptures? We have 46 books while Jews and Protestants have seven fewer, that is, 39. I thought that perhaps this somewhat “tongue in cheek” Book of Jonah might not be part of the Jewish scriptures, but it is. Since it is, could we not with right evaluate Israel’s present conduct with respect to the Palestinians in Gaza in its light? The Israelis are fighting for their lives against those who don’t recognize Israel’s right to exist. But does Israel really feel that the war it has conducted against the Palestinians in Gaza will bring these people and other Arab nations closer to recognize its right to exist? Won’t it do just the opposite? With more than a thousand dead in Gaza, and with reports of the slaughter of women and children by Israelis soldiers, won’t the effect be just the opposite, especially when the

casualties suffered by the Israelis are so few, in the teens, compared to the thousand or more the Palestinians have suffered?

The Book of Jonah presents us with a God who is concerned about everyone, even the animals. What a wonderful touch! God is concerned about the animals. But its message has not yet been heard by us humans, for if it were heard we could not continue to slaughter one another in wars, because we would have to recognize the fact that all of us are beloved of God. We could not refuse to care for those for whom God cares. Or if we did, we would have to recognize the fact that we were not God's followers, at least not the God of the Book of Jonah.

In his inaugural address Barack Obama said that our patchwork heritage, our different religious traditions and languages and cultures, is a strength, not a weakness. "We cannot help but believe," he said, "that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace." If America does that, it will be following the message of the Book of Jonah. Let us hope and pray that America and the whole world will get on this biblical page by discovering its common humanity.