

"The sign of Jonah" Matthew 12:38-41 Ash Wednesday 2022

Grace and peace in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In a sense, how strange for our Lord to compare Himself and Jonah, the reluctant and cowardly prophet. Our reading of the Old Testament (Jonah 3:10) follows the more well-known story: That of Jonah and the great fish.

The Lord called Jonah to preach his Word to the city of Nineveh. "Get up, and go to Nineveh, a great city, and proclaim against it; for their wickedness has risen before me." Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, located in the north of the country known today as Iraq. At that time, the holy land was divided between the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south. The Assyrians were a threat to both. In the end, the Assyrians destroyed the kingdom of Israel.

Therefore, Jonah did not want to go to the city of the enemies of his people and preach the Word of God. He tried to avoid the call and the wrath of God by boarding a ship to Tartessos, a city on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, Tartessos was located in Spain.

However, God sent a great storm in the middle of the sea. "And the sailors were afraid, and every one called on his god: and they threw the things that were in the ship into the sea, to unload them." Jonah told them, this is my fault and the punishment of my God. So, they threw Jonah into the sea, but Jonah did not drown. A large fish swallowed him and Jonah stayed three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. Jonah prayed to the Lord and heard him. The fish vomited Jonah on the seashore.

Here begins our reading of the Old Testament: "And the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, and go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach in it the message which I will tell

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you. And Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. And Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, three days' journey. And Jonah began to go into the city, one day's way, and proclaimed, Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed."

It turned out this way: "And the men of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the eldest of them to the least of them. And the news came to the king of Nineveh, and he rose up from his seat, and cast off his garment, and put on sackcloth, and sat on ashes. And he proclaimed and proclaimed in Nineveh, at the command of the king and his great men, saying, Men and animals, oxen and sheep, do not enjoy anything, do not give them food, or drink water; and let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry loudly to God: and let each man turn from his evil way, from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows if God will turn and repent, and turn away from the wrath of his wrath, and we will not perish? And God saw what they did, that they turned from their evil way; and he repented of the evil he had said he should do to them, and he did not do it. "

And our Lord said in the Gospel: "The perverse and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it, except the sign of the prophet Jonah, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so shall he be. Son of Man three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. "

A sign, a great miracle, in fact, would be given to them and to the world: the Lord's resurrection, prefigured in the story of the prophet Jonah. The belief in His resurrection would be for that generation and for all generations to come the touchstone by which the followers of Christ will be distinguished from their enemies. (Jesus refers to the time between His burial and His resurrection according to the Jewish way of calculating time, and any part of a day is counted as one full day.)

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In both cases of Jonah and Jesus, a man came back from certain death to call people to repentance of their sins with a promise of forgiveness. And this is the point of Jesus' discourse: "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment against this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, one greater than Jonah is in this place."

The Ninevites listened and listened to the call to repentance that Jonah preached. He was only a prophet called by God to bring this message, while here was the Author of the message itself in the midst of the Jews, and both His person and His message were neglected. On the Day of Judgment, therefore, this pagan people will rise in accusation against the Jewish nation and its leaders. There are still descendants of the Assyrians in this world and most are Christians. God's plan for the Assyrians went beyond Jonah's understanding, and His thoughts are still beyond our thoughts.

Jesus is greater than Jonah and His message is for all nations. He who repents and trusts in Jesus will not avoid only the destruction of a city, but eternal death. As the church, our mission is to call all men to repentance and eternal life in Christ. But, we must not forget to repent and seek absolution ourselves.

The early Christians observed with great devotion the days of the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today marks the beginning of a season of prayer and repentance in the church. From today until Resurrection Sunday, forty days, we remember the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. We dedicate this time, then, to examine the heart, repent of our wickedness and receive the forgiveness of Christ.

God created us to live in the joy of His communion, to love all of humanity and to live in harmony with His creation. But sin separates us from God, our neighbor and the creation and, therefore, we despise

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and destroy the life that our Creator wants for us. As disciples of Jesus, our Lord, we have been consecrated to him through our Baptism in order to believe in God, love him and love our neighbor and live responsibly with the earth.

Repentance and all that constitutes discipline during the Lenten season helps us in our spiritual struggle and prepares us to celebrate with joy the feast of the Resurrection. I invite you, therefore, to confess your sins, imploring our heavenly Father the strength to preserve in faith, as His children. In this we will have the peace that surpasses all understanding. Amen.