

Third Sunday of the Year [B] 2024 (St. Rose, OSF)

In 2019 Pope Francis established that the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (today) is to be called “Sunday of the Word of God,” reminding us of how important God’s Word, Sacred Scripture, is in our life.

This exalted role of the Bible in our life of faith has not always been the case. In fact, when I was a child, one of the things Catholics were known for was that they did **not** read the Bible, in contrast to most other Christians. If Catholics even *owned* a Bible, it most likely sat on the coffee table or on a bookshelf, and was primarily used to record family baptisms, weddings and deaths. We thumbed through our prayer books and missals, but not the Bible. We were often intimidated by non-Catholic Christians who could regularly quote the Bible, chapter and verse.

That began to change in 1943 when Pope Pius XII wrote an encyclical (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*), calling for new translations of the Vulgate, the Latin version of the Bible which was St. Jerome’s translation from 1500 years earlier, and encouraged Catholic lay people to read the Word of God. Then 20 years later, the Council Fathers of Vatican II much more forcefully encouraged Catholics to make the Bible a regular part of their spiritual life—of course with the readings at Sunday and daily Mass, but also in their own private prayer and reflection.

The American bishops put it this way: “The Church encourages Catholics to make reading the Bible part of their daily prayer lives. Reading these inspired words, people grow deeper in their relationship with God and come to understand their place in the community to which God has called them.” But they also counsel that reading the Bible isn’t enough. “If Scripture remains just words on a page, our work is not done. We need to meditate

on the message and put it into action in our lives. Only then can the word be ‘living and effective.’ (Heb. 4:12)”

Pope Francis has spoken about that often—that the Bible cannot be just words on a page, but that the Holy Spirit “makes Sacred Scripture the living word of God, experienced and handed down in the faith of His holy people.” Last fall, after preaching at a local parish at a Sunday liturgy, one woman sought me out after Mass. She told me, “Monsignor, I have heard today’s Gospel dozens, maybe hundreds of times, but you brought me to a whole different way of looking at it that makes so much sense for my life. Thank you!” I responded, “Oh, that wasn’t me at all. It is the Holy Spirit working in you, perhaps through me.” For myself, I can read the scriptures for the daily liturgy year after year (the Gospels are the same every year, and the first reading every other year), and find new meaning each time, precisely because the Word of God is alive, the living, breathing inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And now to today’s word....

The first reading this morning is from the Book of Jonah, a story which all children love. It’s wonderful for coloring books and story books. Everyone knows about this prophet who was swallowed by the whale. The story is almost humorous, but it does tell us something about the human condition. The way this first reading is put together, it looks like Jonah heard the Lord’s message, rushed out to do God’s will in Nineveh, and left the city hugely successful when the people and even the king turned around their lives.

But that wasn’t the whole story. The part we heard of Jonah and his commission to preach to Nineveh, was actually the *second* time he had been sent by the Lord. The first time he heard the command, Jonah did what many of us try to do, when we are supposed to do something we would rather not do: he ran away. He didn’t want anything to do with it. He hated the Ninevites, who

had done so much harm to his people. He certainly didn't want anything good to happen to them. He wanted the Lord to give them what was coming to them.... Before he was ready to accept God's call, **Jonah** had to repent.

And repent he did, in the belly of the great fish where he screamed out for God's mercy. God **was** merciful to Jonah and gave him—much as he gives us—a second chance. This second time Jonah received his commission, he *did* respond. Apparently he was effective and convincing—the city converted immediately.

But the Book of Jonah goes on to tell us that the Ninevites' conversion was not all that pleasing to the prophet who had hoped to find them hard-hearted. He thought he could go through the motions, they would laugh at him and go their merry ways, and **then** God would destroy them. So Jonah had *another* lesson to learn. He also had to repent of his personal interests. He had to learn how to be a true *instrument*. He had to do God's will in **God's** way, not in his own.

Paul the Apostle had to learn that same lesson. He was fanatically eager to do God's will as **he** saw it, and that meant exterminating the followers of Jesus the Nazarene. He had to be knocked down and blinded before he could see that what he had taken for God's will was really his own. Paul then experienced **real** repentance, and he was ready to take on at all costs the work of God.

Repentance is the message of John the Baptist as it was of Jonah. **Jesus** then takes up that message, but with a twist. He preaches repentance because the “time for fulfillment is here; the reign of God is at hand.” There was no time to waste. To show the urgency of that message, Jesus chose disciples to help him and then continue the work he had begun.

Jonah, John, Jesus and Paul called not only individuals but also whole nations to repent. In each instance the message was radical and the messengers suffered for it. But the truth came out because the instruments were willing to suffer anything to testify to the truth.

That is our mission too. It means preaching and living repentance on the part of all for the injustices we commit, sometimes even in the name of God—things like our disregard for human life: in the womb, to the elderly, against the poor. It means swearing off our greed when much of the world has nothing to eat. It means purging Christ's message of our prejudices toward people of a different race or religion, or who speak a different language, say Spanish or Arabic. Like Jesus, we must **incarnate**, make real and living, the truth in all that we say and do. We must replace our hardness of heart with a fullness of heart, the heart of Jesus Christ.