

3rd Sunday, yr. B, Xavier Church, Jon. 3, 1-5.10; Ps. 25, 4-9; 1 Cor. 7, 29-31; Mk. 1, 14-20.

Ward Biemans SJ

Dear brothers and sisters, from the first reading it seems that Jonah immediately fulfils the word of the Lord addressed to him. But that is not what he did. For we have not heard the beginning of the book of Jonah. There, we are told that the Lord sends him from the Holy Land to Nineveh. Nineveh we can situate along the river Tigris, in present-day Iraq. But Jonah is not going and he wants to flee by boat to Tarsis. Now in those days people thought that Tarsis, which is in the southwest of Spain, not far from Seville, was the most western city on earth.

Actually, it is not surprising that Jonah flees. Nineveh was known as a city of the Gentiles, where people did not know the Lord. But the alternative, Tarsis, is even worse. In the book of Jonah, going west symbolizes night and death. Away from the Lord, it says, the other way, indeed, a flight from all that could make him profoundly happy.

The second time the Lord asks him to go to Nineveh, Jonah listens. And only after he has prayed, in the belly of the fish, the Lord gives him a chance at new life. 'You brought up my life from the pit of the grave, Lord my God,' Jonah prays. The Lord saves him from destruction and then Jonah goes, all the way to Nineveh.

Even in our time, unfortunately, it still happens that people do not always respond to what the Lord is asking of us. In his life, Jesus explicitly prayed for unity among Christians and indeed, among all believers. 'That all who believe in Me may be one,' He says in the Gospel according to John. So that goes even further than unity among all Christians.

In the course of the history of Christianity there have been many church splits. And perhaps we also experience in ourselves some resistance when it comes to seeking contact with other Christians, with other believers and non-believers outside our own church walls.

Yet we must also remember that many efforts have been made over the centuries to restore unity. And often they have succeeded. In recent church history, there has been good progress in cooperation and conversation with other Christians, such as the Orthodox, Lutherans and Anglicans, as well as the dialogue with Jews and Muslims. But much work still needs to be done to achieve more unity.

In the Gospel we hear about Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James and John. From their response we can tell that they immediately surrender to his word. Immediately they abandon their nets. Even father Zebedee is left alone with the day laborers, who were hopefully taking care of him.

Apparently, the first disciples were at once convinced that they wanted to be fishers of men. They were not only young, but also full of this ideal. Following God and being full of fire, which is not age-related, this is more about whether you are young at heart and inwardly free to choose for Him.

St. Paul talks about true freedom in the second reading. He says: 'Let those who have wives be as though they had none'. Of course, this is not a plea to dislike your spouse, or not to be considerate of one another. What matters is that even when you are married, you are available to do God's will and help to build up the Church and society. This also applies to those who buy goods. According to Paul, those who buy stuff should be as if they did not become owners. Because then you would not be attached to your possessions, but rather be free to deal with them or not.

Jesus' call sets people free from everything which holds them down. The saints and blessed of the Church can teach us how to understand true freedom. Blessed Charles de Foucauld, for example,

focused his ideal of total surrender to God on an identification with the 'least', the abandoned, deep in the African desert. Pope Francis mentions him at the end of his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, on universal brotherhood and sisterhood. Charles de Foucauld had a desire to feel himself a brother to every human being. He asked a friend: 'Pray to God that I truly be the brother of all.' Ultimately, he wanted to be the universal brother. But he only became the brother of all, identifying himself with the least. May his striving for unity among all people, inspire us as well. Amen.