

Ben Frie SJ

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time.

No hesitation, no delay, nothing. When Jesus sees people he wants with him, he speaks to them and immediately they drop everything and go with him. So too in Nineveh: Jonah goes around, tells people to repent and ready, they do. Is it that simple? Jonah first ran away from it, fled in a ship and was thrown overboard for endangering the ship with crew and all. God did not allow it, caused a big fish to swallow him up and spit him out on the beach after three days. Once he did what God asked of him, his mission was extremely successful, but albeit secondarily.

Vocation is no small thing. Mark may give that impression with his 'immediately' and 'instantly', but the reality is different. Jonah gives the typical human reaction to being called: first saying no, running away, going in exactly the opposite direction to what was asked, going into hiding, flee.

In the story of Jonah, it takes a storm, unruly sailors and a big fish to bring Jonah to the fulfilment of his call, his destiny. Only then does the fragment we read today follow: it is Jonah's so-called second call. There comes a day when man accepts and follows the call of his soul.

And then suddenly things move very quickly. Perhaps that is what Mark wants to emphasise with his version of the vocation stories that characterise the beginning of Jesus' life in the public eye. Once you dare to believe in the gospel, there is no time to quietly let the idea of vocation grow. With Mark, everything has to be swift and radical; it is a gospel for people who want to make haste in proclaiming the gospel. There is no time to waste.

This fits well with the image of the times in those days. Paul expected a soon end of the world and, in his view, there would not be much time left to proclaim and shape the faith. The time is fulfilled, it is said, the so-called kairós or the very auspicious moment has arrived. The kingdom of God is coming, it can no longer be stopped.

The Marcus Gospel is the first to come into circulation and thus relatively shortly after the events involving Jesus of Nazareth. It is sometimes referred to as the military type of vocation story: it consists almost exclusively of command and enactment. Repent; come. Follow Me. Immediately they abandoned their nets; immediately He called them. On the spot they left their father and followed Him. How father was to manage this was not an issue. Repent. Come. Follow.

With both Jonah and Jesus, the Jews saw that the Gentiles were repenting and turning around radically through the calling of Jonah and Jesus. People needed to be fished while it was not too late. They had to be rescued from the waters of the sea, which in the Bible is usually the sea of life, with its peril of life, destruction and death. Not for nothing does God send a big fish to rescue Jonah and give him a second life.

When the time is right, you answer your calling. It was a notion in Jesus' time: the creation story had reached that point then, that the Messiah had to come, at that time and not later. And then He appears and says: follow Me. Come do what I have done. Help Me to fish people up, help Me to save them. Saving people, if only we could. But there are so many... The readings suggest there is no point in objecting. Don't waste time, respond alertly to what you hear Jonah saying, what you see Jesus doing and Paul proclaiming.

Jesus' way of life must become the guideline of our actions. We must really want to live like Jesus, want to act and judge like Him. You must intervene when you feel unable to do so. Repent. Follow Me. Immediately. At once.

Do we hear sufficiently what God is calling us to? Do we dare to respond without hesitation to what He triggers in us? Are we innerly still willing to turn our lives around? That is the question Mark asks us with his story. He feels that there is no more time to hesitate.