

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time – B
Fr. Chad S. Green
Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
21 January 2018

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 25
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
(Mark 1:15) Mark 1:14-20

Repent and Triumph!

My first two years of seminary formation were at St. Patrick’s Seminary in Menlo Park, California. At the heart of the campus is the beautiful Main Chapel, built over one hundred years ago. It has a long rectangular shape with a high barrel roof and 14 gorgeous stained glass windows, seven on each side. The windows depict two scenes paired together, one at the bottom and one at the top. At the bottom is a scene from the life of Christ. At the top is a scene from the Old Testament that prefigures the bottom scene from the life of Christ. That is, the scene from the Old Testament foreshadows something that will be fulfilled in the life of Christ.¹

For example, one of the windows depicts Jesus Christ bursting out of the Tomb on the morning of His Resurrection. The Risen Christ steps up over the stone, holding a flag in triumph, as the soldiers guarding the Tomb fall over in fear and astonishment.² The Old Testament scene at the top of this window shows the Prophet Jonah at the moment of his own “resurrection.”³ On the horizon is a whale with a spout of water shooting up out of his blowhole. And in the foreground is Jonah moments after the whale had spit him out onto dry land. Like the Triumphant Christ, Jonah has his arms raised in triumph, thanking and praising God for raising him back to life after three days of entombment in the depths of the whale’s belly.⁴

All fourteen of the stained glass windows are stunningly beautiful, but I don’t remember what is depicted in most of them. There are only three that have stayed in my memory all these years later. The window with Jonah is one of them. Part of what attracted me to this window was the whale – it’s not something you often see in a church stained glass window. But even

more, what attracted me was its depiction of *triumph*. The triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death. The triumph of Christ prefigured by the triumph of Jonah. The triumph that God has offered to His people throughout salvation history, and continues to offer to each and every one of us today.⁵ Many times I sat below that window in prayer, meditating on that triumph that God has in store for all of us.

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With the first words of His ministry, Jesus Christ taught His first disciples how they could share in His triumph: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”⁶ *Repent*: this is the first word of instruction that attracted Simon, Andrew, James, and John.⁷ Repent has an aspect of being sorry for and confessing something that one has done wrong. But repent is more than that – much more than that.

Repent comes from the Greek word *metanoēō*, which means “to change one’s mind” or “to think differently.”⁸ Repentance is changing one’s purpose in life; to go in a different direction.⁹ To leave behind things of the past that are less than what God calls us to; that are less than what God made us for. The first disciples were attracted by Jesus’ call to repent, and in response they left their old way of life behind in order to follow Him.¹⁰

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Jonah is also an example of repentance, a symbol of turning back toward God. God called Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh.¹¹ Jonah didn’t want to go, so he responded by turning away from God.¹² He went the opposite way, toward the sea and onto a boat, so that he could sail to farthest end of the known world – as far away from God as possible.¹³ In his effort to get away from God, Jonah ended up in the belly of the whale – the depths of despair.¹⁴

In the belly of the whale – in that despair – Jonah discovered that, even when we turn away from God, we are never out of the range of His mercy.¹⁵ In the belly of the whale – that rock-bottom moment – Jonah learned that he could still repent. He turned back to God. The Good News for Jonah – the Good News for all of us – is that God’s offer of repentance extends even to the depths of our rock-bottom moments. When we are in our worst moments of despair or feeling separated from God, we might be surprised to find that God’s mercy meets us even there.¹⁶ It’s always possible to change one’s mind. It’s always possible to think differently. It’s always possible to turn back to God.

Through his repentance and by God’s mercy, the whale spat Jonah out onto the safety of dry land.¹⁷ That is what triumph looks like (not specifically the part of being spit out by a whale). Triumph is being rescued from the abyss of despair and brought back to the safety of solid ground – the safety of the Kingdom of God. That is why my seminary’s window depicts Jonah raising his arms in triumph. That is why from that moment of triumph Jonah could witness to and deliver the message of repentance and conversion to the people of Nineveh.¹⁸ He was able to help the people of Nineveh participate in that same repentance, conversion, and triumph of God’s mercy.¹⁹ Because of God’s mercy, Jonah triumphed; the people of Nineveh triumphed; and all of us are able to triumph!²⁰

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Here in my first year of being a priest, several people have asked me what my favorite part of being a priest is. This triumph is my favorite part of being a priest. Being welcomed into the moments in which God’s mercy triumphs in people’s lives. Moments in which people follow the Jesus’ instructions to: “Repent, and believe.”²¹ I witness this triumph most especially in the confessional, where people repent of their sins and believe in God’s forgiveness. Like Jonah,

they can raise their hands in triumph when they confess and then hear the words of absolution that I pray over them. And I participate in this triumph myself when I, a sinner, confess my sins to another priest, and hear him pray the words of absolution over me.

Just like for the first disciples, the Kingdom of God is at hand and is present to us right now in Jesus Christ.²² This is our triumph because His coming into our world means that the reign of the evil one, the reign of sin and death over human beings “is at an end.”²³ Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God invites all of us to follow Him, to come out of the abyss and into the triumph of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

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Is there a triumph in your life that God has helped you with? Overcoming an addiction, a persistent sin, a difficult relationship, or an illness? Celebrate and give thanks to God for those triumphs! Are there more triumphs that God has in store for you? There certainly are – as there are for all of us. Now is the time to turn back to God, repent, and believe that He will help you. If you need more help, please know that I am available to be there for you – whether inside the confessional or outside. It’s my honor and my favorite thing as a priest to be included in the triumph of God’s mercy in people’s lives – in *your* life. I don’t have all the answers, but I promise that I will do my best to help.

¹ See *Dei Verbum* 15:

“The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ...and to indicate its meaning through various types.”

“...in [the books of the Old Testament] the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way.”

See *Dei Verbum* 16:

“God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. ...the books of the Old Testament...acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament...”

² See Matthew 27:62-66; 28:4

³ Jonah 2:11

⁴ Jonah 2:1

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 55

⁶ Mark 1:15

⁷ Matthew 4:17-22; Mark 1:15-20

⁸ *metanoēō* (μετανοέω) = “repent” as in Mark 1:15

Strong’s Concordance G3340: “to change one’s mind” or “to think differently”

Vine’s Expository Dictionary of the New Testament: literally, “to perceive afterwards” (*meta*, “after,” implying “change,” *noeo*, “to perceive;” *nous*, “the mind, the seat of moral reflection”)...hence signifies “to change one’s mind or purpose,” always, in the NT, involving a change for the better, an amendment, and...of “repentance” from sin.

⁹ CCC 1431-1432

metanoia (μετάνοια) = “repentance” as in Mark 1:4

Strong’s Concordance G3341: “a change of mind, as it appears to one who repents, of a purpose he has formed or of something he has done”

¹⁰ Mark 1:18, 20

¹¹ Jonah 1:1-2

¹² Jonah 1:3

¹³ From bibleatlas.org/tarshish.htm:

“Tarshish is the name of the Phoenician colony on the river Tartessus, called also Baetis, the modern Guadalquivir [in what is now southern Spain]. It was the farthest limit of the western world as known to the Hebrews.”

“From Joppa Jonah fled to avoid compliance with God’s command to go to Nineveh and preach repentance there (Jonah 1:1). He found a ship bound for Tarshish as far toward the West as Nineveh to the East.”

¹⁴ Jonah 2:1, 3-10

¹⁵ Jonah 2:3, 7

¹⁶ Edith Stein, found in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”? with a Short Discourse on Hell*, translated by Dr. David Kipp and Rev. Lothar Krauth (1988), 221:

“The descent of grace to the human soul is a free act of divine love. And there are *no limits* to how far it may extend.”

¹⁷ Jonah 2:11

¹⁸ Jonah 3:3-4

¹⁹ Jonah 3:5, 10

²⁰ See John 16:33: “[Jesus answered them,] ‘...take courage, I have conquered the world.’”

²¹ Mark 1:15

²² CCC 2816; “Kingdom of God” in *CCC Glossary*

²³ Raymond Deville and Pierre Grelot, “Kingdom” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Leon-Dufour, tr. Eugene Ulrich, 256