

## Readings for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

21<sup>st</sup> January 2024

### First Reading: Jonah 3:1-5,10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

### Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

### Gospel: St Mark 1:14-20

After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

## **A Reflection for the Third Sunday after Epiphany**

Over the past decade, with the increasing spread of internet availability to people in all countries of the world, there has also been a huge increase in the importance of social media as a way of sharing information. It is estimated that more than half of the world's population now use some form social media. Alongside that has come the rise of social media influencers: people who have a reputation for knowledge and expertise on a particular topic. They make regular posts on that topic and generate large followings of people who pay close attention to their views. They can and do create trends and encourage their followers to buy the products that they promote.

Many of us, and I include myself in that, may think that this has little to do with us – probably a reflection of the generation we belong to since social media influencers tend to be more popular with the young – Generation Z as it

is sometimes known, those born between about 1990 and 2010. But maybe we should pay a bit more attention as it is likely that the impact of social media influencers will only increase. Whilst initially such influencers were celebrities who had become famous in another field, such as film stars or sports persons, that is now less common. Increasingly, ordinary people have become known and popular simply through their views on a particular topic, and this is big business. The number of followers an influencer can have ranges from the tens of thousands to several million, and promotional deals can be worth a great deal of money, enough to earn a very good living. And as we are probably aware, they can also have an effect in the political sphere, impacting our society and moral values, for good or perhaps not so good.

Of course, people having an influence in society is nothing new. Celebrities have long been leaders of trends, journalists have always shared their opinions on any number of topics, and the wider public has always chosen whose views to pay attention to and who to follow. The difference is that, in recent years, the technology has changed and with it the ease with which anyone can share their opinions. The volume of such material available to us is vastly increased, and sadly not everything we see is quite what it purports to be.

So who do we choose to follow? As Christians, we are primarily followers of Jesus. In last week's Gospel, we heard Jesus say to Philip 'Follow me', and in this week's Gospel Jesus says the same thing to Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. Jesus says the same to us. Those first disciples literally walked off with Jesus, and learnt as they went, but what does following Jesus mean for us?

In today's Old Testament reading, we hear part of the story of Jonah. Today is the only Sunday that any part of this somewhat unlikely tale that appears in our three-year cycle of readings, although I am sure we are all familiar with the whole story. Jonah is one of the minor prophets, a follower of God who was called to pronounce judgment on the city of Ninevah. Ninevah was the capital of the powerful Assyrian empire who destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, so this was not an attractive assignment. Jonah certainly thought not and ran away, taking a ship as he thought to escape God. A fierce storm blew up which the sailors interpreted as of divine origin and sought the cause. It was traced to Jonah who urged them to throw him overboard; they were reluctant but eventually did so and the storm immediately died down. Meanwhile, Jonah was swallowed by a large fish and, three days later, was spewed out on dry land. Coming to today's passage, God again sends Jonah to Ninevah, and this time he goes to the vast city and preaches his very brief sermon: 'Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!'

If the story of the fish seems improbable, the effect of Jonah's preaching is astonishing. A lone foreigner, a few words of Hebrew, and the entire city, even the animals, repents of its wickedness. And God relents. What follows after today's passage is also surprising. One might think that Jonah would be pleased by the positive impact of his words, but instead he was angry: if he was going to preach doom and destruction, he wanted to see it happen! Yet, he already knew that God is gracious, merciful, abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishment.

Jonah was a follower of God, but nevertheless a reluctant prophet, resisting God's call to follow as God asked. His is a story with its humorous aspects, but it is also our story, a human story. We can understand Jonah's reluctance to take on this difficult and potentially dangerous assignment, thinking of those times when we too resist the call of duty and responsibility, when we turn away from what we ought to do. Sometimes, we can probably also understand a reluctance to follow God's call on our lives to go in a particular direction or into deeper commitment, recognising

in ourselves a tendency to prevaricate or to turn away. We prefer to stick with the familiar, even though God promises a richer life.

If it is our story, it is also a story of God, telling of God's message of grace, mercy and steadfast love for all people and all of creation. And it is also a story of the Ninevites. One commentator notes that the phrase translated here as 'Ninevah shall be overthrown', or sometimes that Ninevah will be 'destroyed', could also be translated as Ninevah will be 'changed'. This puts a slightly different complexion on the outcome. The Ninevites chose change; they believed God and repented.

Belief and repentance are the essence of what it means to follow Jesus. At the beginning of today's Gospel passage, we hear the first words spoken by Jesus in Mark's account: 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.' Before he called any of the disciples to follow him, Jesus makes it clear what was important in that call, a message that echoed the earlier prophecy of John the Baptist.

Repentance is not about beating ourselves up about all the things we have done wrong. We may acknowledge those things, but true repentance is more than that. It is about allowing oneself to be changed, to turn back to God and embrace God's values of love and mercy. Or, as Fr David put it last week, to surrender ourselves to God. Then, God is able to fulfil in us all that God calls us to be and do. Change is something that also concerns Paul in the brief excerpt from his first letter to the Corinthians. He urges them to hold lightly to today and live in the expectation of what is to come, taking on the values of the coming kingdom. He knows that change and transformation are on the horizon and he wants them, and us, to be prepared.

What does following Jesus mean for us? Believing and repenting. Believing in Jesus' words and allowing ourselves to be changed by God to embrace God's values of love and mercy. It is these values of God that should guide us as we engage with the world around us and encounter the influencers of modern society, whether on social media or otherwise.