

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Jonah 3:1-5,10

NRSV

Jonah is the archetypal reluctant prophet. Earlier, in 1:2, God has called him to “Go at once to Nineveh ... and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me” but he has tried to escape by sailing to the ends of the earth. God has punished him by having a large fish swallow him.

Now God commands Jonah a second time: God is not going to let him off! He now obeys: he goes to the capital of Assyria, (this being a book of exaggerations) “an exceedingly large city” (3:3). (Excavations show that it was about 5 x 2½ kilometres.) He goes into the city, but only part-way (“a day’s walk”, 3:4): half measures are good enough for him. The first readers probably identified “forty” with either the Flood or the Exodus. Nineveh will be “overthrown” or destroyed. In 3:5, the residents react to this oracle: they believe God (in the person of his prophet) and acknowledge their godlessness. 3:6-9 (not part of our reading) tell us the king’s reaction and edict: he dons “sackcloth” and sits in “ashes” – traditional signs of mourning and repentance; he decrees three stages of repentance for all: (1) admission of guilt, by way of outward signs; (2) change in each person’s attitude to others (in turning away from evil and violence); (3) acknowledgement of God’s freedom in how he responds to repentance (“he may turn from his fierce anger”, 3:9). Then 3:10: God does change his mind: he accepts their repentance and delivers them.

Obviously this is a story, but it is one that teaches; it is a parable. It illuminates an issue of its time, the waywardness of Israel. God is central and powerful. He can favour whomever he chooses, even hated enemies of the past.

Psalms 62:5-12

NRSV

This is a psalm of trust. Vv. 5-7 are the psalmist’s example, which (in v. 8) he invites others to emulate. In God he finds his hope for deliverance, his reference point in life and his “refuge” from enemies. Both poverty (“low estate”, v. 9) and power (“high estate”) do not endure. “Extortion” (v. 10) and “robbery” are means of acquiring rank. Do not depend on wealth; it too is worth little. The *bottom line* is in vv. 11b and 12a: the psalmist has heard God say that power and “steadfast love” (loyalty to the covenant) belong to him: he has learnt this well (“twice”). God does reward everyone based on his or her actions.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

NRSV

In the Revised English Bible, v. 29 begins: “What I mean ... is this: the time we live in will not last long. While it lasts, married men ...”. V. 31b fits naturally: “For the present time is passing away.” We live in the era between Christ’s first and second coming. This is the era in which God calls his church to bring as many

as possible to believe in him and to follow his ways. This is an enormous task, and not one to be taken lightly – it requires maximum effort from a few. Paul expected the era to end in his own lifetime, so to him every minute of each day counted in a big way: time spent on other activities was time lost.

Paul’s advice to married men (v. 29b) – to behave as though they have no wives – must be taken in context, so let us look at the whole chapter. Vv. 32-33 tell us why he wrote vv. 29-31a: “I want you to be free from anxieties ... the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided”. Paul is saying that, at a very critical time in history, when all effort is needed to bring people to the Lord, some need to devote some effort to other matters. We need to examine v. 29b in the context of this letter: (1) In this chapter, he identifies what are God’s commands, his commands, and his suggestions; our reading contains suggestions. (2) In v. 2, Paul recommends that (to avoid sexual deviances) “each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.” Each has “conjugal rights” (v. 3); each has authority over the body of the other. Then v. 5: “Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer ...” He continues: “This I say by way of concession, not command. I wish that all were as I myself am [i.e. single]. But each has a particular gift from God ...” (vv. 6-7). Marriage is important.

So what is Paul saying in vv. 29-31? Given the magnitude of our mission, we need to devote as much effort as possible to God’s work. What we do in the world (e.g. commerce, “deal with the world”) is of transitory value. Our focus should be on preparation for Christ’s second coming.

Mark 1:14-20

NRSV

Mark has just told us, briefly, about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Now he returns to Galilee. His message begins with “the time is fulfilled” (v. 15): the time appointed by God, the decisive time for God’s action, has arrived. “The kingdom of God has come near”: the final era of history is imminent. Numerous sayings of Jesus support Paul’s view that the end is near, but Jesus did say that no human knows when he will come again, and that he will not come when expected (13:32-36). He also said that “the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21), and that the kingdom has begun. Jews believed that when they individually and collectively admitted the error of their ways and returned to God’s way (“repent”, v. 15), the Messiah would come. We too are called to adopt God’s way, to “believe in the good news”. The whole of Mark is an expansion of this verse.

In vv. 16-20, the first four disciples are called: they immediately leave their previous occupations, and follow Jesus. Jesus expresses his command in their terms (v. 17). (Immediacy of response is a mark of this gospel.) These disciples owned nets (v. 19) and had employees (“hired men”, v. 20), so they were people of rank. They gave up security and family (“left their father”, v. 20) to devote themselves to Christ’s mission.