

### Sunday 3 (Ordinary Time) - Cycle B

Today's mass readings bring us three different styles of preaching.

Jonah had run away from God for fear. Chastened by the encounter with the whale he now goes to do what he was asked. He tells the people of Nineveh they are faced with total destruction. All fear and gloom. And he is disappointed when they do repent. Harshness and punishment prevail.

John the Baptist says: "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand." That is better. But still he is harsh – "Brood of vipers" to the Pharisees, always stressing repentance from sin.

Jesus uses exactly the same words, but with a difference. First he says: "The time has come". He is talking to a people following Jewish law, under the Romans, in the economic and political setting of his time. There will be other *Times*, and his teaching will need to be heard differently in them.

Next: he does use the word *Repent*. But let's stop and think how we understand this today. Long ago there were fierce Mission Sermons, stressing in lurid detail the pains of hell and how lucky we would be if we managed to avoid them. The remedy was said to be remorse for past sins, begging forgiveness and determination never to sin again. Just think of the Acts of Contrition that you used to make: "dreadful punishments" "crucified Our Lord" "offended your infinite goodness" a frequent ingredient.

Do you really feel there are things about which you need such repentance? I think not. We are constantly reminded that we are sinners, but this expression does not make sense to us today. Sure: there are acts of unkindness, misjudgement, sloth, greediness and many more. But we cannot whip up the kind of remorse that we found came naturally 50 years ago. Remember it is important to get real with God. Don't say anything you do not mean.

So to understand what the word *Repent* means in our present time we need to go on to the third part of Jesus' proclamation: "The kingdom of God is close at hand."

We can start spelling out the *kingdom* by thinking of heaven. Pure joy. No jealousies, resentments selfishness and so on. Now hear Jesus saying: "it is happening among you". Now.

We do practice a measure of what happens in heaven, though as yet not enough. Think how you treat your children. We can recall – or we have heard – of past days when children were severely disciplined, threatened and punished even when mixed with love. Thought of such practices repels you. You know the children have much growing to do. You are only concerned that all their potential for love, joy and achievement is realised to the best possible degree.

That is how God sees all of us, children at different stages of our growth. We find confession difficult because we are still stuck with experiencing it as obsessed with sin, and sins about which we do not feel that great compunction. God is never angry; he does not "take the hump". Instead what fits our present time is the vision of a warm loving God whose only concern is that we develop to the fullest degree possible the gifts and potential he has put in us.

That is the constant theme of Pope Francis. It is surprising he gets such opposition. It comes from people who cling to outmoded ideas, ideas that belong in past and very different contexts.

When we come to talk to God, whether in daily prayer, examination of conscience or preparation for confession one thing dominates all else. It is his huge love for every individual, and his sole concern that we grow.