

**Homily - 3rd Sunday (A)/ Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
St. Monica's: 25 January 2015**

Jonah 3:1-10 – Called for a second time, Jonah finally responds to God's call to preach conversion to the pagan city of Nineveh. To his surprise – it works!

Psalm 25 – Lord, show me your path, make known the ways of your truth.

I Corinthians 7:29-31 – Time is running out: respond NOW to the Gospel!.

Mark 1:14-20 - Beginning of the Galilean mission; call to conversion; call of the disciples: teaching, proclaiming good news, forgiving, healing.

Prayer for Christian Unity: “Repent!” “Follow Me!”

Last weekend, we had the privilege of welcoming Pastor Brent Walker to the pulpit to launch the week of prayer for Christian Unity. He spoke to us passionately about some of the ways in which we can narrow the gap between the wonder of “God as God is” – infinite, unconditional, unbreakable love – and the “gods” of our own creation: narrower, bleaker visions of God which constrict our capacity to welcome the gift God desires to share with us. He invited us to look at life through “Gospel lenses”, in which Jesus’ own radically life-affirming, life-challenging, and loving image of God is allowed to heal and purify our own limited ways of seeing God – and thereby, of seeing myself, others, the situations of my daily life, my view of the world.

Pastor Brent also helped us to see how Jesus’ invitation “Come and see” (in John’s Gospel) lays the spiritual foundation for the invitation “Come, follow me” we hear in the Synoptic Gospels – so much so, that they are in fact one and the same call. As I was preparing the homily this weekend, I found myself wondering: so just how did this call really happen? In John’s account, which we read last Sunday, Andrew follows Jesus first; it is only after spending the day with Jesus, getting to know him, that he then goes to find his brother Simon, and brings him to Jesus.

Today, we begin our sequential reading of the Gospel of Mark, which is our focus throughout this year “B” of the Lectionary. Mark’s Gospel is the shortest, simplest, and most straightforward of the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, and the first to be put down in writing. Mark focuses on the essentials and moves the plot forward: he shows us a Jesus who is direct in his words and deeds, with a clear sense of his mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. The way Mark tells the story today, it is Jesus himself, walking by the Sea of Galilee, who sees first Andrew and Simon together in their boat, and then James and John, and invites them to become his followers. “Come, follow me,” says Jesus, “and I will make you fishers of people.” The call is immediate; the response is equally so: “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

That's the part that always gets me. **"Immediately."** As I reflect on my own journey, I see how I always find so many reasons to delay, to put off, to procrastinate, even though I know deep down the Lord is calling me to something. I allow myself to become busy with something else, or I distract myself by unfocused and unproductive activities, so as not to hear that persistent call to make the healthy choice, the life-giving choice, the call to the greater good. I imagine that some of you may struggle with the very same challenge: overcoming those obstacles that get in the way of our hearing and responding to Jesus' call: *to come and see, to come and love, to come and follow*. Or, in the words of the 13th century prayer of St. Richard of Chichester, made popular in the musical *Godspell*:

*Day by day, O dear Lord, three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly, Love thee more dearly,
Follow thee more nearly, Day by Day!*

As we come to the end of the week of Prayer for Christian Unity today, on this feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, we who belong to the Christian Churches are called to follow Jesus on the path of unity: not in some long-distant future, but "immediately." In many ways, we are still a long way from the unity Jesus desired for his followers: a unity to be lived out in word and sacrament, in community and mission, in prayer and action. At the level of Church structures and hierarchies, of a few thorny theological and moral questions, of attitudes around Church membership, sacraments, marriage, and ordination, we are still far from the kind of unity Christ is calling us to. And that's not necessarily one person or one group or one denomination's "fault" more than anyone else's. The only conscience we can examine is our own. But what might happen if all Christians, individually and communally, pledged to become part of the solution? What if we humbly acknowledged our own contributions to the problem of disunity, and opened our hearts to Jesus' call to break down the boundaries of denominationalism, seeking to fulfil his desire: "Father, may they all be one!"

One thing we can do is to accentuate the positive: seeing not first the differences and the failures, but naming the successes, the steps taken towards dialogue and fellowship and common action with our sisters and brothers in Christ. For Christ has entrusted us with a mission: to proclaim today, in our world, to the people of our time, the saving power of God. As a member of the national Anglican-Roman Catholic theological dialogue, I have become involved in over the past few years in a "common mission project": a series of short reflections addressing questions of fundamental human experience: *Why believe? Why belong? Why the church? Why so many churches? Who is Jesus? What difference does faith make? What is my mission in life?* And so on ...

We discovered several very important things working on these texts together. First of all, that no matter how we might differ on certain more “esoteric” points, when it came down to addressing basic questions of human meaning – the kind of questions young people, living in a secular and multicultural world, tend to ask – we were so much on the same page that, except for the kinds of examples and texts we tended to refer to, we ourselves could not even detect whether it was a Catholic or an Anglican who had responded to the question! We were capable of bearing common witness, and we were following a very fundamental ecumenical principle: **act together whenever possible, act apart only when necessary.**

Differences of opinion, of focus, of emphasis are not necessarily a bad thing. In ecumenical dialogue of course, but even when confronting differences within our own church, our own society, our own church communities and even families. As St. Paul reminds us, each member of the body has his or her own unique function and place: within the Body of Christ, there is a healthy interdependence. But there is One Head: Jesus Christ. When we lose sight of Christ, when our role or function or vision becomes detached or separated from the whole – that is, from Jesus as Head, as the One providing the vision and focus and inspiration – then the whole Body suffers. We are many parts, but we are all One Body, animated by the One Spirit.

Our Gospel today gives us two answers to the divisions that continually threaten us. (1) Jesus says to us: REPENT! Be converted. The Kingdom of heaven has come near. Let Jesus lead you from darkness into light. Reconnect with his Gospel, his preaching of the Kingdom of God. Give your life to Jesus, and not to kingdoms of your own making, not to the agendas of pressure and lobby groups, whether social, political, ecclesiastical, or otherwise. Be converted by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

2) Jesus also says to us: FOLLOW ME! What – or who – do we choose to follow? This leader? That ideology? A profound attachment to the rightness of my own opinions? We are challenged by the Gospel today to make a choice: to follow not any earthly leader or ideology, but Christ, our Saviour and Friend, who reveals to us the true face of God: infinite, unconditional, unbreakable love. The same Jesus who walked along the seashore of Galilee, who called James and John, Peter and Andrew, and billions of others throughout the centuries to become his disciples, also walks along the seashore of my world, my community, my life. He says to you, and to me: “Come, follow me.” He invites you, and me: be my disciple; become part of my community; know the loving face of my Father; share in my mission.

As the disciples began to follow Jesus, they would come to know his mission more intimately: teaching and preaching, proclaiming Good News of justice and peace for all God's people, forgiving and reconciling, healing and restoring to wholeness. That is the mission. It is not about being right. It is not about forming cliques that reinforce us in being right and proving others wrong. It is about being profoundly united with Jesus, in his life and death and Resurrection, and embracing his call to share on his mission.

Before going to his Passion and Death out of love for us, Jesus uttered one final heartfelt prayer: "Father, may they all be one, as you are one with me and I with you." Today still, this prayer of Jesus rings out anew. Catholic or Orthodox, Anglican or Lutheran, United or Presbyterian, Baptist or Pentecostal, mainstream or free-church – Father, may they all be one. French-speaking or English-speaking, black or white, native-born or immigrant, young or old, rich or poor, professional or working-class, traditionalist or progressive, gay or straight, convert or cradle Catholic, able-bodied or disabled, righteous or sinner, male or female – Father, may they all be one!

This kind of unity doesn't just happen naturally, by osmosis. It is the fruit of hard work, and negotiation, and compromise, and a real willingness to understand and appreciate not only my own point of view, but that of my partner in dialogue: especially when that partner is a brother or sister in Christ. Last week, as we welcomed Brent to our pulpit to share the Word of God with us, as we began the Bible study designed to help us meet Christ in the sacrament of Holy Scripture and the sacrament of our daily lives, as we launch this weekend a new communications committee to assist us in our task to "get the message out" to the world of all that the Lord is doing in and through this parish community, we are responding to the Lord's call. May we continue to work toward this unity together – here in the parish, and in the larger community – so that our Church may truly become a sign and source of unity throughout the world, so that we may bring to reality the heartfelt prayer of Jesus still today: "Father, may they all be one."

Prayer of commitment

Take us from where we are, to where you want us to be.

*Make us not merely guardians of a heritage,
but living signs of your coming Kingdom.*

Fire us with passion for justice and peace between all people.

*Fill us with that faith, hope and love which embody the Gospel;
and through the power of the Holy Spirit make us one,*

That the world may believe, that your name may be enthroned in our homes and families,

That your church may more effectively be your body,

We commit ourselves to love you, serve you,

and follow you as strangers no longer, but as fellow pilgrims. Amen.