



Things to Ponder

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Echoing Discipleship (Based on Jonah 3:1-5, 10, & Mark 1:14-20)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Movies today are rarely made in “real time.” The action of an entire day is sometimes telescoped into a half-hour. When the story spans a number of years, a flash of “10 years later” indicates that a lot of intervening events have been left out. The Scriptures sometimes use this same technique as is clear in the readings for today’s Mass.

In our first reading today (Jonah 3:1-5, 10) the Lord tells Jonah to “set out for the great city of Nineveh and announce the message I will tell you.” We might easily assume that Jonah went immediately, because the passage continues, “So Jonah made ready and went to Nineveh.”

But this was not the first time that the Lord tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah could be termed a “reluctant disciple.” When he initially heard God’s call, he hopped a ship going in the opposite direction. You might say that Jonah had a whale of a time before he set out in the right direction.

Today's Gospel (Mark 1:14-20) relates the call of Jesus' first four disciples, two sets of brothers: Peter and Andrew, James and John. The Gospel portrays their response to Jesus' call to be fishers of men an instantaneous decision to leave the families and their livelihood to follow a complete stranger.

The passage telescopes into an immediate conversion what might well have happened over some period of time. Perhaps they had heard about this man, Jesus. Perhaps they were present when Jesus performed some miracle. They were probably curious, even interested, in this new prophet. Jesus' words, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand,” galvanized them in action.

The writer of this Gospel is not interested in these preliminaries, just the call of Jesus and the response of the disciples. And so it appears that the response of these first four disciples to Jesus wasn't an instantaneous event, like the conversion of St. Paul by a bolt of lightning that knocked him from his horse.

This initial call of Jesus to the disciples had to be echoed and reechoed over and over again as they came face to face with their human weaknesses, faults, foibles, erroneous assumptions, their denials of and desertions of Jesus. But in spite of all

these weaknesses, that initial call of Jesus must have echoed in their hearts, and Jesus' ready forgiveness gave them the courage to carry on the task of discipleship that Jesus had entrusted to them.

We, too, received a call from Jesus to discipleship at the moment of our baptism. Yet, like Jonah, we are sometimes reluctant disciples. We hear the voice of the Lord at Mass, in the scriptures, in the depths of our conscience, in the teachings of the Church, and yet find ourselves heading in the opposite direction. Like Peter, Andrew, James and John, in receiving Holy Communion we give an immediate "Yes, Lord," but then quickly revert to our patterns of life that mask that discipleship. As was the case for Jonah and the apostles, our initial call and answer to follow the will of the Lord needs to be echoed in repeated calls and answers, as God hones to a fine point the specific mission He wishes us to accomplish.

Each of us, as the Gospels have been reminding us for the past three weeks, has a specific vocation from the Lord. In general terms, this vocation may be to the married life, to parenthood, to religious life, to priesthood, the diaconate or to the single life. But God doesn't have just a "general" idea of what He wants us to accomplish, but rather a very specific mission that He has entrusted to each one of us, that can never be fulfilled by anyone else in the world, now or future.

Cardinal Newman reflected on this mystery of call and re-call when he wrote, "God has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have a mission. Therefore, I will trust him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what he is about. O my God, I put myself without reserve into your hands." As Cardinal Newman prayed, so should we.

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