

Homily for January 23, 2000
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle B

By Father Charles Bowes

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

In life's dark and desperate times we provide hope.

I'll never forget the time I came close to drowning while fishing with my brother on the jetties of the St. John's River.

While changing my position on some barnacle- and seaweed-encrusted boulders at the river's mouth, I lost my footing and plummeted, bouncing from one rock to another until my body wedged between two boulders and my head was but inches from the churning sea. My brother rushed to pull me out, which he did, and we went on fishing for awhile, but as we were returning to the car, he said, "Now we won't say anything about this to Mom will we, little brother?" It was one of those near-death experiences that brothers share but which prudence dictates we not tell our parents about right away.

Life and death and water are closely associated. And at least half the time in the Bible water represents death. It is the waters of death that close over us at the end, that cut off life and force our last breath. It is from death, the final threat to our personality, that God delivers us in Jesus. And God does this through the Church, which conveys His power through word and

sacrament and the gracious ministry of His servants. "Come after me," Jesus says to those first apostles in Mark chapter 1, "and I will give you power to confront the dark things of the world, to enable men and women to confront their deepest fears, and trust in God's deliverance."

When we hear Jesus say, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men," we usually translate that in a comfortable fashion of folks sitting on a dock or in a boat casting net or line and reeling in those poor folk so in need of healing and help. But, the 19th-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard takes up this text of St. Mark's gospel and gives it a novel and unsettling interpretation. He says that Jesus wants us to be fishers of humankind not in the sense of sitting on some dock or in some boat and catching fish in a remote way. No! Jesus wants much more than that. He wants disciples to be fishers in the sense of becoming the bait which attracts the fish. What happens to the bait in the fishing process? It is a source of attraction and comfort to those in the dark waters. It is at times consumed. Kierkegaard reasons that only to the extent that a person is consumed in the faith, only to this extent is one a disciple of the Lord. ...What a message!

Are we ready for that? Would we be like the Athenians who walked away from Paul, or like some of the listeners who did the same to Jesus?

Too often Jesus is presented as a “flower child,” all sweetness and light. And Christian religion is seen the same way - private and comforting. While there is a comfort in the faith, when the gospels are seen in their freshness, in their newness, they reveal something quite different. Jesus speaks to our deepest fears and hurts - our deepest being - and says: “Come! Follow me!” The road on which we have been invited is one toward death as a way to eternal life. This is not an exercise in masochism. It is simply the message - the risk the New Testament teaches and our bishops and pope confirm: “Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will preserve it,” says Mark chapter 8. This holy food and this holy gathering provide us with the nourishment to be the bait in the world’s darkness.

A good example of this style of life is given by none other than Adlai Stevenson. When Stevenson was our ambassador to the United Nations, he was physically assaulted one time. Some people have an irrational hatred or suspicion of the U.N. It was United Nations Day in Dallas, Texas, a month before they killed the President. In Stevenson’s case, a woman hit him over the head with a sign. What would you do, press charges? No; what Stevenson did was to say to the reporters, when they asked him for a statement, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins and the redemption of ignorance.”

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