

Signs

I think you know by now that my pastoral responsibilities require me to make a fairly substantial commute – i.e., more than 100 miles each way! On my way to Mishawaka, I do some of my driving on a crowded expressway, chugging past such garden spots as Gary, Indiana. However, I get off I-94 as soon as is practical, preferring instead to finish the trip on less-crowded and less-hectic secondary roads. It was on one such trip that I saw an interesting and thought-provoking sign in front of a roadside church: “If you are looking for a sign from God, this could be it!” Hmmmmm...

This brings to mind a challenge which was put to Jesus:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from You.” He said to them in reply, “An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. At the judgment, the [people] of Nineveh will rise with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and there is something greater than Jonah here.” (Matthew 12: 38-42)

Oh, my! This passage presents us with “the sign of Jonah”, a double challenge, confronting us right here where we are – namely, the decisive moment which stands between the completion of our forty-day Lenten pilgrimage and the beginning of the great forty-day celebration of the Resurrection.

The first challenge confronts us as we reflect upon the just-completed Great Fast. Just as the citizens of Nineveh were confronted with a call to conversion, so were we: the call came to the Ninevites through the call of the prophet Jonah, while ours came to us this Lent through preaching and through the liturgical and penitential practices of our Church. The call is to “repentance”, which - some may be surprised to know - does not refer only to penitential exercises; these may, after all, be nothing more than external behaviors which we “put on” to impress people, perhaps even to impress ourselves! Rather, “repentance” literally means a “change of direction”, a change of heart which, it is hoped, will be manifested in a change to more-Christ-like behavior. An old hymn cries out to us “Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways” – in other words, if we were smart we would stop offending God by hurting others, for when we hurt one another we end up hurting ourselves in the process. The Ninevites heeded God’s call and were converted; can we say the same? Christ the judge declared that the pagan Ninevites were better off than His ostensibly faithful contemporaries; how will He judge us – as individuals and as Church?

The second challenge is that of Pascha: Resurrection. Think back to the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus. After his death, the rich man was condemned to eternal punishment because of his lack of concern for the poor beggar. Resigned to his own fate, he pleads pitifully with Abraham for his surviving family:

He said, “Then I beg you, father, send [Lazarus] to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.” But Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.” He said,

“Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” Then Abraham said, “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.” (Luke 16: 27-31)

This, of course, begs the question: Do we believe in the Resurrection?

It is easy to sing “Christ is Risen!” with our lips, all the while thinking that this refers only to something that happened a long time ago in a far-away corner of the world. If this were the case, we would say “Christ arose”, but that is precisely what we do not say: we absolutely do not confine the Resurrection to the past tense – as if Christ could be confined to one time or place! A contemporary hymn tells it the way it is:

*Christ is alive! No longer bound
To distant years in Palestine,
But saving, healing, here and now,
And touching every place and time.*

As God brought Jonah back to life after his three-day “death” in the belly of the whale, so does the Risen Christ come to us in the midst of whatever “death” besets us – not only physical death, but also that death which lurks in all other realms, be they spiritual or emotional or relational or intellectual or behavioral. After the death of His friend Lazarus, Jesus gave us a foreshadowing of His Resurrection – and ours: Jesus went to the tomb where Lazarus was buried; calling his friend forth from death, Jesus ordered that the newly-raised Lazarus be freed from the burial cloths by which he remained bound. In the same way, Christ comes to deliver us, to set us free from all that holds us bound. He will not do so, however, without our consent and cooperation.

Christ offers us the sign of Jonah. It was rejected by the scribes and Pharisees, whose lives - like that of the rich man - are held up for us as examples of paths to be avoided. In His Person, Christ presents to us a challenge coming to us from the Book of Deuteronomy:

I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord your God, heeding His voice and holding fast to Him. (Deut. 30: 19-20a)

We are offered many gifts: a sign to direct us and a divine hand to lead us. Another gift is our free will, which allows us to accept or reject God’s other gifts. May we choose wisely!

Fr. Jim Karepin, op