

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today is the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. In 2019, Pope Francis designated the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time as the Sunday of the Word of God. In light of today's Gospel, it is understandable why Pope Francis chose this Sunday.

When I was a student in Rome, we were taught that the words of Jesus in today's Gospel were the core of what the historical Jesus preached when he lived and walked among us: *"This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."* These verses, then, are among the most important verses in the Gospels.

*"This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand."* We believe that Jesus' coming initiated God's kingdom. However, we also believe that God's kingdom will not be fully realized until Jesus returns in glory. In today's second reading, Paul was expecting Jesus to return in glory very soon and, therefore, conveys a sense of urgency.

*"Repent, and believe in the gospel."* The Greek word for repent, *metanoete*, calls for a change of heart, a change in the direction of our life, a turning away from selfishness and sin, and a turning outward in love to God and others. Also, it presumes a new way of seeing. Likewise, Jesus calls us from unbelief to belief. In other words, he calls us to believe in him, i.e., to entrust our lives and our futures to him. The word *gospel* means *good news*. Because Jesus said, *"Believe in the Gospel,"* this suggests that Jesus himself is the Gospel. The good news is the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ.

If we compare Jesus' core message to Jonah's message, the common thread is the call to repentance. Throughout the Old Testament, we are reminded that a prophet's message is the best test of his authenticity as a prophet. If the prophet tells the people everything is good and wonderful, he is not a true prophet. In other words, a prophet's message must always include a call to repentance. We are called to constant conversion, i.e., to a constant change of mind, heart, and life.

In the past, one of my favorite radio shows was Paul Harvey's *The Rest of the Story*. Although today's first reading complements today's Gospel, it is also worth knowing the rest of the story. Jonah was the Reluctant Prophet. Most of us know that when God first called Jonah to preach at Nineveh, he tried to run away from God by boarding a boat to Tarshish and ended up in the belly of a large fish for three days and three nights.

The part of the rest of the story with which we are not familiar is what happened afterward. When God did not carry out his threatened punishment, Jonah was angry. He told God that he ran away because *"I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish"* [Jonah 4:2c]. Jonah then asked to die. God sent him a gourd plant to provide shade for him. The next day a worm attacked and killed the plant. Again, Jonah was angry and asked to die. God responded, *"You are concerned over the plant which cost you no labor and which you did not raise; it came up in one night and in one night it perished. And should I not be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons?"* [Jonah 4:10-11a]. As Pope Francis constantly reminds us, mercy is the quality most proper to God.

My brothers and sisters, today's readings teach us two important lessons. First, repentance always has to be an integral part of our lives, i.e., turning away from selfishness and sin and turning outward in love to God and others, in other words, striving to become the-best-version-of-ourselves. Second, all of us are called to be merciful and compassionate like God. I think one of the biggest reasons some people do not like Pope Francis is because he consistently preaches God's mercy.