

Vocation II – Reluctance to do good

Last Sunday we read about the many “Call” passages that run through the Old and New Testament; episodes in which a patriarch or prophet or apostles or characters from the parables of Jesus are “called” to follow God’s invitation to a deeper and wider experience of reality, to fullness of life – called from the otherwise monotony of normality to take risks, to BE rather than merely exist.

Well, I don’t know about you but I often feel a reluctance to respond to such “calls” even when God is their source. I drag my feet in responding to the needs of others, extending myself, going out of my usual way. To put it frankly, I often feel reluctant to care about others or the things God cares about.

I think I learned to be this way growing up in a society where rugged individualism and personal privacy have been highly prized. I once tried to make amends to a fellow for basically nothing at all and his response was “You go your way and I’ll go mine.” You get to relate to others that way in our preference not to be bothered beyond minimal sociability.

Jonah is a case in point, manifesting a reluctance to respond to God’s summons in today’s first reading. But in his case you might conclude he has good reason, for he is called by God to *go now to the great city of Nineveh and denounce it, for its wickedness stares me in the face*. Back when this fictional story was written people remembered that being sent to Nineveh was tantamount to being told to confront Hitler’s Gestapo or the recent adherents of ISIS in the Middle East. It would have been even scarier, for Nineveh was the capital of the ruthless Assyrian Empire of the 800’s to 600’s BC – frightening besieged cities by impaling captives before their city walls – among other atrocities! So I don’t fault Jonah for booking passage on a slow boat to Spain rather than head for Nineveh and tell it to change its behavior.

But in avoiding that fate what happens? He runs into danger anyway. The ship runs into a violent storm, the sailors blame him, toss him overboard and, much to our literary delight, just like Pinocchio, Jonah is swallowed by a big fish. And then, again much to our literary delight, the fish gets indigestion and spews the unhappy man up on a beach of the Middle East, where God awaits him and says in effect: *Do what I asked*.

In a way Jonah’s experience is God’s way of getting him to care about people, even the worst of people – as God does. Getting him to open his eyes, his heart, his mind, to acquire the scope of a divine concern that may not only change the hearts of the Assyrians but release *him* from his usual cowardice to become a caring human being. For where Jonah saw only terror, God – as the story says at the end – saw only human beings *who cannot tell their right hand from their left*. We can’t be sure Jonah learned that lesson: adopting human compassion as the prime motive for what we do.

Fortunately, when we switch to the Gospel reading for today we see a different kind of response to the call of Jesus; Simon and Andrew, John and James drop what their doing, their entanglement, as it were, in nets, and without a moment’s hesitation followed him – into danger, yes, but freedom and maturity in its deepest sense as well.