

## Leaving Nets & Navigating Internet for God's Word

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of the Year** – Cycle B – 24 January 2021 .... **Sunday of the Word of God**  
**Readings:** Jon 3:1-5, 10; 1 Cor 7:29-31; Mk 1:14-20

*“And immediately they left their nets and followed him”* (Mk 1:18)

Prologue: Celebrating the ‘Sunday of the Word of God’—which Pope Francis instituted to be held every year on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, with the Apostolic Letter ‘*Aperuit illis*’ of September 30, 2019—it’s fitting to reflect on today’s readings from the viewpoint of God’s word, which is spoken by prophets like Jonah, John the Baptist and even Jesus, The Prophet par excellence, whose word announces the Reign of God and is also a call to follow him. Symbols of net and internet can be used keeping in mind Jesus’ call of fishermen and our call to be ‘Online’, today.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The Book of Jonah is not a historical document of the life and preaching of a historical prophet called ‘Jonah’ who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (see 2 Kings 14:25), but rather a satirical work or ‘didactic fiction’ meaning a sermon in the form of a story. The deep truths underlying the Jonah story are: (a) God wants all to be saved, (b) God chooses prophets to preach salvation and repentance, and (c) those who hear God’s word can either freely accept or reject God’s offer of salvation. This book—written after the Exile sometime in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC—critiques Jewish exclusiveness and stresses that God was Lord of all peoples. God only expects all peoples to be open to God’s word, with readiness to convert themselves by changing mindsets and lifestyles. We are all familiar with Jonah the so-called ‘reluctant, escapist prophet’ who refuses to go to Nineveh, the ‘pagan city’ which was the capital-city of the Assyrians, archenemies of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously, Jonah would have rejoiced seeing them punished and destroyed by Yahweh, rather than repentant, converted and spared. After his adventures at sea, being tossed and turned during the tempest, and in the belly of the whale, God’s word comes to him “a second time” (3:1), saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city ...” (v.2). Jonah goes and, as directed by Yahweh, he calls for repentance. Jonah’s proclamation of God’s word leads to the Ninevites’ conversion: “The people of Nineveh believed God ....” (v.5) proclaim a fast with sackcloth and ashes and are saved.
2. Similar to the prophetism exercised by Jonah for repentance and conversion of the Ninevites, today’s gospel passage opens up with mention of two prophets: John and Jesus. There is a similarity-with-dissimilarity and continuity-in-discontinuity in their lives and messages. Cousins though they are, and though they both preach repentance, first, John is but the ‘friend of the bridegroom’ who is Jesus (Jn 3:26). Second, John preaches that God will act in the future, while Jesus proclaims that: “The time is fulfilled ...” (v.15), in him, here-and-now. Third, John brings the old covenant to a close with its focus on law and adherence to it, while Jesus inaugurates a new covenant, limited to but one commandment, love, yet enlarging it with radical depth and dynamism. With one simple statement, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee” (v.14) evangelist ensures that John the Baptist’s mission is accomplished; he is imprisoned, while Jesus is free to proclaim ‘Good News’. Not only does Jesus proclaim the ‘*kairos*’, special time of God breaking into human history, but also appears in a God-chosen place: Galilee. His message will be addressed, first, to simple folks and his call will be directed to fishermen of little learning—seven of the Twelve will be of this group—probably knowing not much more than making nets and casting them for a catch of fish.

3. Nets, fish and fishing — besides being understood literally, are rich biblical images that symbolize God’s judgement of peoples (e.g., Eccl 9:12; Amos 4:2; Hab 1:15-17; Ezek 26:5, 32:3, etc.). While ‘net’ in the First Testament predominantly signifies judgement, in the Second Testament, the Galilean setting of Jesus’ call for discipleship is linked more to fishing as an exercise in hauling in a catch of fish. This interpretation is more plausible since Jesus commissions his first disciples with a promise: “I will make you fish for people” (v.17). While Jesus calls Simon and his brother, Andrew, who were “*casting*” a net into the sea, he calls James and John who were “*mending*” their nets. Casting and mending, fishing and fixing, toiling and recuperating, venturing outward and retreating inward, respectively, suggest the active and the passive dimensions of discipleship. Jesus’ word: “Follow me” results in the brothers following him “immediately” (vv.18,20). Jesus’ announcement of God’s Reign and his call to “*repent, and believe in the good news!*” (v.15) bear quick results. The word for repentance, *metanoia*, refers to ‘changing one’s mind’. Jesus must’ve used the word ‘*shûbh*’ or its Aramaic equivalent, which implies “turning around 180 degrees.” Repentance requires a 180-degree turnaround and a 100-percent following of Jesus. By placing the ‘call of the disciples’ soon after the ‘call for repentance’, Mark links *repentance and discipleship*. In sum, if one chooses to follow Jesus, one must do a 180-degree turnaround and follow him 100%. Simon, Andrew, James and John’s life was totally turned around: they left boats, nets and families, too.

### **Linking the Psalm and 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading to the Theme of Repentance and Response to God:**

Today’s psalm (25) further develops the theme of repentance. It echoes God’s mercy: “Remember your compassion, O Lord, and your merciful love, for they are from of old.” In the second reading, Paul puts the Kingdom/Reign of God in eschatological (end-time) perspective: “The appointed time has grown short” (v.29). By repeatedly using the words “as if not” (Greek, *hōs mē*), he exhorts his community to give ‘counter witness’ to all that the world holds precious. In sum, he says that, nothing and no one is absolute; except God. Thus, one must be detached from everything and everyone, and attached only to God.

### **Two Contextual Concerns for Preaching God’s Word:**

*From Net to Internet:* Jesus’ disciples had to leave their nets in order to busy themselves with God’s word. Rather than leaving nets, would Jesus not ask us so much to launch out on the Internet and preach God’s Word in the most effective way possible?

*From Exclusivism to ‘Catholic’ Universal Ecumenism:* Pope Francis writes in ‘*Aperuit Illis*’: “This Sunday of the Word of God will thus be a fitting part of that time of the year when we are encouraged to strengthen our bonds with the Jewish people and to pray for Christian unity... The celebration of the Sunday of the Word of God has ecumenical value, since the Scriptures point out, for those who listen, the path to authentic firm unity.” What is our attitude to others and what is our approach to ecumenism?

**In Lighter Vein:** ‘*Baavaani langoti*’ is a popular Gujarati folktale of a devoted *baavaa* (sadhu) who owned nothing but a *langoti* (loincloth) and lived a life fully devoted to God. Once, a rat nibbled a hole in his *langoti* and so he got a cat to protect it. However, he had to beg for extra milk to feed the cat. “I’ll keep a cow to get milk for the cat and myself,” thought he. So, he got a cow, but had to find fodder for the cow. “Too troublesome!” mused he, and married a woman to look after the cow. With wife, cow and cat to feed, he got some land and hired labourers to work upon it. Soon, he became the richest man in town. When asked about why he denounced discipleship, he explained, “This is the only way I could preserve my *langoti*!” To preach God’s Word Online or Offline we don’t need too much: Bible, computer and wi-fi should suffice!

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