Wednesday of the First Week of Lent

Gospel text (*Lk* 11:29-32): While still more people gathered in the crowd, he said to them, "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. At the judgment the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation and she will condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and there is something greater than Solomon here. At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here".

"Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation"

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Today Jesus describes that the sign He will give to "evil people" is Himself as the "sign of Jonah": "Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation". (Lk 11:30). Just as Jonah allowed himself tossed overboard the boat to still the raging tempest and save the sailors' lives, so Jesus allowed Himself to be tossed overboard to calm the storms of sin that threaten our lives. Just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of the whale before being spit out on dry land, so Jesus would spend three days in the belly of the earth before walking out of the empty tomb (cf. Mt 12:40).

The sign that Jesus would give to the "evil people" of every generation is the sign of His death and resurrection. His death, freely accepted, is the sign of God's incredible love for us: Jesus gave His life to save our own. His resurrection from the dead is the sign of His divine power. This is the most powerful and moving sign ever given.

But Jesus is the sign of Jonah in yet another sense. Jonah was an icon and agent of conversion. At his preaching, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jon 3:4), the pagan Ninevites converted, as everyone from the king to children to animals covered themselves in sackcloth and ashes. During these forty days of Lent, we have someone "far greater than Jonah" (cf. Lk 11:32) preaching conversion to us —Jesus Himself— and our conversion should be just as thorough.

St. John Chrysostom writes in the person of Christ: "For Jonah was a servant, but I am the Master; and he came forth from the great fish, but I rose from death. He proclaimed destruction, but I am come preaching the good tidings of the kingdom."

A week ago, on Ash Wednesday, we covered ourselves in ashes and heard individually the words of Jesus' first homily, “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (cf. Mk 1:15). The question for us is: Have we responded yet with deep conversion like the Ninevites and embraced that Gospel?

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “Jonah was a servant, but I am the Master; and he came forth from the great fish, but I rose from death. He proclaimed destruction, but I am come preaching the good tidings of the kingdom.” (Saint John Chrysostom)

- “One thing is clear: God’s sign for men is the Son of Man; it is Jesus himself. And at the deepest level, he is this sign in his Paschal Mystery, in the mystery of his death and Resurrection. He himself is “the sign of Jonah”.” (Benedict XVI)

- “Jesus links faith in the resurrection to his own person: ‘I am the Resurrection and the life’ (Jn 11:25) (...). He speaks of this unique event as the ‘sign of Jonah’ (Mt 12:39). The sign of the temple: he announces that he will be put to death but rise thereafter on the third day.” (Catechism Of The Catholic Church, Nº 994)

Other comments

“There is something greater than Solomon; and there is something greater than Jonah here”

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Today's Gospel invites us to focus our hopes in the very Jesus. Saint John Paul II had, in this regard, written that “our salvation would not come from a formula, but from a Person and the certitude this Person instills into us: ‘I am here, in your midst!’”

God —who is Father too— has not gone back on us: “Christianity is a state of grace, it is the surprise of a God that, not satisfied by the creation of the world and of man, has decided to side by his creature” (Saint John Paul II).

We find ourselves beginning Lent: let us not ignore the opportunity the Church is offering us: “In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.” (2Cor 6:2). After looking at Our Lord Jesus Christ's suffering face during his Passion, shall we still dare asking for additional evidence of His Love? “For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2Cor 5:21). Even more: “He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will He not also give us everything else along with him?” (Rm 8:32). Do we still demand

more signs?

In Christ's bloodstained face “there is something greater than Solomon here… there is something greater than Jonah here”. (Lk 11:31-32). This suffering face of the last hour, of the hour of the Cross is, in words of Saint John Paul II, “a mystery within the mystery, in front of which human beings should prostrate in worship.” Indeed, “to return the face of the Father to men, Jesus had, not only to take on man's face, but to suffer the “face” of sin, too”. Do we want more signs?

“Behold, the man!” (Jn 19:5): herein lies the great sign. Let us watch it from the silence of the “desert” prayer: “What every Christian has to do at all times to pray, he ought to do it now more carefully and more devotedly: we shall then abide by the apostolic institution of the forty days” (Saint Leo the Great).