

January 22, 2012

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:14-20

Homilist: Deacon Mike Mocek

Sometimes the words that we write or speak are not received by others exactly as we had intended. A few years ago, Betty and I were traveling in northern Michigan and heard this story at mass one Sunday morning. It seems a priest was newly assigned as pastor of a fairly small parish. Upon his arrival, the priest decided that he wanted to be able to recognize all of his parishioners and call them each by name as quickly as possible. The parish had a new pictorial directory so he went right to work memorizing faces and names. And, by the end of the week, he was feeling pretty confident. During his homilies that first weekend, he explained what he was doing so the people would not be too surprised, and as they filed out after mass, he greeted each person by name. "Good morning, you look like Karen Jackson." And, "Hi, you look like Robert Daniels." The people were quite impressed and things were going really well until a distinguished-looking, middle-aged woman walked up. She, unfortunately, had not listened very closely to the homily and was oblivious to her new pastor's

initiative to learn names. So when Father greeted her with, "Good morning, you look like Helen Black," the woman stopped cold in her tracks. Her face turned beet red. And as she stormed away, she was heard saying, "Well, Father, you don't look so hot in green either."

Even our best intended words don't always get across as we meant. I often think about that while reading some of the words in Saint Paul's letters –like our second reading today from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Could Paul have actually written, "From now on, let those having wives act as not having them; those weeping as not weeping; and those rejoicing as not rejoicing?" What was he thinking? To help us understand why Paul wrote these words, we have to put them in context. Unlike Helen Black and many others in today's culture of sound bites and simple answers, we have to pay attention to the larger picture. What was going on around Paul at the time of his writing? How might his words fit that situation? Paul wrote to the Corinthians about midway through the first century. Believers at that

time, including Paul, regarded the second coming of Jesus as imminent. There was a great sense of urgency. Time was running out and Paul was encouraging his followers to focus attention on their relationships with Jesus Christ and make everything else in their lives secondary. Given that compulsion, it is not hard to understand why Paul may have resorted to far-reaching language to get his point across and motivate his followers to be ready. Jesus Christ used the same technique in many of his parables. Great teachers know that they have to capture our attention first before we can be ready to receive the message.

Perhaps even more important than understanding why Paul wrote those words in the first century is understanding what they mean for us today, in the twenty-first century. We are still waiting for the second coming of Jesus Christ so the sense of urgency that Paul and his followers felt has faded. But does that make it any less important that we stay prepared? It might make it more difficult but it is certainly no less important today than it was two thousand years ago.

The comforts that we enjoy in our lives today challenge our acceptance of the fact that nothing in this life lasts forever. We tend to live from day to day as if there will be no change. Yet, we know that the loss of a job, the end of a

relationship, an accident, an illness, or death can change everything in a heartbeat. Paul is warning us against a fixed-for-life mentality – to be prepared not only for the myriad of changes that we face throughout our lives, but especially for the ultimate change that we all will face when we leave this life and move on to the next.

But what about that sense of urgency? Our Gospel today from Mark gives us the examples of Simon and Andrew who were fishing and abandoned their nets to follow Jesus, and of James and John who left their father when Jesus called them. What if they had waited for the time to be right? Jesus' earthly ministry was short. Had these four disciples waited, they might have missed their opportunity. Paul's call came dramatically on the road to Damascus and, in an instant, his entire life changed course.

Last weekend, Monsignor Johnson reminded us that we are all called by our Christian baptisms to lives of faith and action. The urgency of our call may be different than it was for Simon, Andrew, James, John, and Paul, but it is no less there. None of us know what the next turn in the road may bring. The world as we know it is passing away. The time will never be better for us to seize the opportunity and answer God's call.