

My dear people of God, today's readings contain an invitation for us to turn to God. Jesus begins his ministry by inviting all to repentance, because **'the time has come and the Kingdom of God is close at hand'** (Mk.1:15). God wants all people to repent of their sins that they may be forgiven. God longs to forgive the sins of everyone who repents, for we are all his children. This is clearly shown in our first reading, although the people of Nineveh, the Assyrians, had caused incalculable harm to the Jews, God ordered Prophet Jonah to preach repentance to them. At first, Jonah was reluctant and attempted to run away from his divine commission. When he was cast overboard, and swallowed by a big fish, and rescued in a marvelous manner, he resumed his prophetic ministry with great speed. To the surprise of Jonah, Nineveh listened to his message of doom and repented immediately. Let us focus more on the readings.

The prophet Jonah announced to the people of Nineveh **'only forty days more, and Nineveh is going to be destroyed'** (Jonah 3:4). Jonah does not say a word about God's readiness to forgive; rather, he crudely announced the punishment to come to them. Fortunately, the unexpected happened; the people of Nineveh repented and expressed their repentance the way people expressed sorrow and regret those days, by dressing in sackcloth and keeping a rigorous fast. God forgave their sins and the city was spared.

Although Jonah accomplished his mission successfully, he was not happy about God's mercy. We can draw a sublime lesson from today's reading: Jonah stands for a narrow and vindictive mentality of the some Jews. A good number of them cultivated an intolerant nationalism, which limited the mercy of God to their nation. The Book of Jonah opposes the narrow nationalism of Judaism, after the exile in Babylon, by opining that salvation is not just for the Jews, but for all. God's mercy is boundless that is why Jesus is inviting all to conversion. **'Repent and believe in the Good News; the Kingdom of God is close at hand'** (Mk.1:15).

Jesus invites, urges and pleads with everyone to turn away from sin, and this is not for fear of being punished as Jonah announced, but for a much higher motive, **to enable them to enter into the kingdom of God**. Jesus invites everyone to take decisive steps: to repent, that is, to break away from sin once and for all. **It means a total conversion**. The word conversion means to change direction, to retrace one's own steps. The fact is that, by sin man walked away from God; **conversion means to turn around and start walking in God's direction, ever coming closer and closer to him**. This is a must if we want to enter into God's Kingdom; as long as we persist in sin, we are unable to follow Jesus; the chains of sin prevent us from walking after Jesus.

Dear brothers and sisters, **God is calling everyone to conversion; no one is excluded**. In fact, the whole Scripture is a continuous invitation to repentance. God, through his prophets, **continue calling everyone to abandon sin and come back to him**. The readings of today make the point abundantly clear. We could say that conversion is an ever-standing invitation of God to man. But it is not enough to have repented of sin once. Sin clings to us; it keeps on pulling us away from God at all times; therefore, at all times, we should strive to come back to God, because God's power and love shines in every person who renounces sin. There is no person so wicked whom God will not forgive the very moment he or she repents.

Jesus is calling us to believe in the Good News. It means to put ourselves under God's loving rule, giving him a free hand to lead us or total surrender to God. Andrew, Peter, John and James are good examples of discipleship. Jesus said to them **'follow me' and I will make you fishers of men**, and at once they left everything and followed him (Mk 1:17). They did not ask for explanations neither did they stop to think about their families and so forth. In a word, they just put themselves at Jesus' complete disposal.

Finally, dear friends, to be a Christian, we must be on guard against becoming engrossed in material things as pagans do. As Christians, we should have our eyes always fixed on our final goal. According to St. Paul **the world as we know is passing away** (1 Cor.7:31). What really matters is not the present life but the life to come, hereafter. Therefore, let us strive to wait for Christ's coming with a clear conscience at all times so that when he comes we will find favor at his kingdom. Amen!