

THE SIGN OF JONAH

The 1st Reading and Gospel from this past Wednesday's Mass was the story of the preaching of Jonah, along with Jesus' word that "...a greater than Jonah is here." I want to unpack both readings a bit for us; I hope that contemporizing will make the points a bit sharper.

If Jonah (on the 2nd try!) makes it to Nineveh, we need to know that it was the capital of Assyria (the same nation that obliterated the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C.). Where, geographically, was Assyria? It was precisely where modern-day Iraq is. Substitute "Baghdad" for "Nineveh," and you have a fairly good updating of the story.

The Book of Jonah depicts a Jew forced by God to preach to them, and they in fact repent. Brought into our times, imagine an Israeli heading to Baghdad, preaching (among others) to the family of Saddam Hussein, and his listening—all the people of Iraq fasting, praying, and repenting! "...every man shall turn from his evil ways and from the violence he has in hand" (Jon. 3:9). Would that not be incredible? But one must accept this possibility, otherwise the Book of Jonah has lost its impact.

Through this, we are taught several things. First, God's desire is for the salvation of ALL people, even those regarded as "enemies." Second, no one is beyond redemption if truly repentant. Third, we may well be called to be tools or instruments of God's mercy toward those we don't like, and running away won't cut it.

In the Gospel, Jesus calls "this generation" evil because it seeks a sign. Ironically, it would seem, Jesus should not have any problem with this request since He has worked plenty of miracles (healings, feedings, exorcisms...). Why not one more? But He won't. The reason is that all of Jesus' miracles are acts of love—they are never command performance magic shows. Herod wanted exactly this, in Luke's version of the Passion Narrative (Luke 23); he didn't get it. The "Jews" wanted an additional sign after Jesus fed the multitudes (John 6); they didn't get it. And yet, in a strange way, the folks in today's excerpt did get a sign.

Jesus tells the crowds that He is "greater than Solomon, greater than Jonah." He works many cures and casts out demons; He says He is greater than the greatest "Son of David" and greater than the prophet most effective in bringing the nations (the *goyim*) to repentance. Who is He, then?? Forcing us to ask the question is indeed a "sign" for us, if we're ready to read "the signs of the times." Jesus knew this: it's why He posed the question to His disciples (Matthew 16 and parallels)—"Who do you say that I am?" They had their answer (whether or not they truly understood it). We must answer the same question.