

[Jonah 3, Mark 1:14-20]

Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus began his public work in Galilee by announcing that God's reign had begun, and challenging his hearers to **repent** and **believe the Good News from God**. We read those words today because we know they still apply to us, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is better to say the **reign of God**, or **God's rule** rather than *kingdom*, for Jesus is not announcing a new empire to replace the Roman empire, or God ruling like a super dictator. Much less was he promising to make the world a Christian kingdom, with Hindus, Muslims and Protestants ruled by the pope.



The gospels can be quite difficult to understand, for they bring us up against the *transcendent dimension of reality*, God, who is totally **other**; different from everything we know. When we get even a glimpse of God, the Holy One, it turns our cherished ideas inside out. And because the gospel challenges us, we might try to keep it safely locked up in our 45 minutes in church on Sunday. But Jesus' words challenge us to look truthfully at every **change** that happens in our life; and to see it as part of the reign of God.

For that is what the reign of God is: us admitting that God, now the risen Christ, our friend, has control. We go about our lives imagining that we are totally free; that **we** decide what we will do each day. Yes, we **are** free, but who gives us our freedom? Who **made** us? Do we **trust** Christ's Holy Spirit which lives within us? **This** is the wonderful Good News that Jesus invites us to accept: that God, who is **infinitely** loving, **is our friend**.

The prophet Jonah, in today's first reading, strongly resisted God's rule. I encourage you to read the whole book of Jonah for yourself: it has only four short chapters. Jonah's not a true story, any more than *Jack and the Beanstalk* is a true story; but it **teaches** a deep truth. Before we had good biblical scholarship, we thought that bible stories like Jonah were literally true, and tried to work out what kind of whale could possibly have swallowed Jonah and vomited him up safely on the beach.

No, Jonah is a *parable*, a *fairy story* about a prophet whom God told to go and preach to the great, evil city of Niniveh, so that its people would repent, and God would not have to destroy them. But Jonah didn't want to. He didn't want the Ninevites to repent. Perhaps he just hated foreigners, or sinners. Anyway, he ran away from God, taking a ship in the opposite direction to Niniveh.

But God outwitted him, sending a storm; then, when the sailors threw Jonah overboard, God sent a great fish to save him. Eventually Jonah *did* preach in Nineveh; the people *were* converted and the city was saved. The rest is interesting too, but you will have to read it for yourself.

What's the point for us? Where might **we** be resisting God's plans for **us**. In what ways do we need to 'repent'; to change or broaden our minds.

May I give you a startling example? Most of us accept, fearfully, that nuclear weapons are here to stay. There are 14,000 of them, in nine countries, enough to wipe out all life on the planet. Even a **few** nuclear explosions could destroy civilisation. Just fourteen years ago, a small group of people here in Melbourne **repented** of this attitude, and saw that even **possessing** nuclear weapons and **threatening** to wipe out one 'enemy' city is a **grave sin** against God and humanity. Those few people saw the bigger picture.

They started the *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, or ICAN. What a crazy, impossible goal! But now, just fourteen years later, ICAN has grown to be world-wide; it won the Nobel Prize for peace in 2017, and has persuaded more than 60 countries to sign a United Nations treaty declaring nuclear weapons to be illegal. Just last week, this treaty became law. Of course the countries that **possess** nuclear weapons have not yet signed the treaty, nor has Australia. But that time will come.

All this happened because a few people 'repented'; saw the bigger picture. Admitted that the way we are doing things is wrong, and can be changed. They worked hard towards bringing about the Reign of God. The reign of God has a cost. Jesus announced God's kingship 'after John the Baptist was arrested' and murdered by king Herod. Jesus too would be murdered by the leaders of his own religion and government.

We probably won't face such dangers, but the question for us is: are we prepared to let the Good News, the infinite love with which God loves us, change **our** lives each day? Or do we sometimes run away?