



**Homily for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

**Cardiff Cathedral**

**Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021**

**Archbishop George Stack**

When I was a schoolboy in Highgate, London, a hundred years ago(!) some of us used to escape from school and sit in St. Michael's churchyard just up the road. We didn't realise it at the time, but one of England's greatest poets was buried in that cemetery. Only later did I learn that it was the final resting place of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In 1817 he wrote perhaps his best-known poem: "The Ancient Mariner". It tells the story of a sailor, escaping from the turmoil of his life caused by his drug addiction. Taking to the uncertain world of the sea, and all that symbolises, the voyage of the mariner is disrupted when the ship on which he sails is almost lost in a storm which is both natural and psychological. His killing of the albatross, and all that symbolises, leads to a profound encounter with darkness, loneliness and dread. Miraculously rescued and coming back to the land of his inner self, the words of another seafarer almost lost at sea, John Newton, suit the Ancient Mariner well. As a result of his own storms and being rescued from a sinking ship, Newton wrote the hymn Amazing Grace: *"I once was lost. But now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see."*

The story of the prophet Jonah in today's Old Testament reading is not that much different to that of The Ancient Mariner or John Newton. Jonah is the reluctant prophet. He doesn't want to be unpopular. He doesn't want to be a failure. He doesn't want to be a laughingstock when people

ignore his warnings about God's plan to destroy their city of Nineveh as a punishment. Jonah likes to be liked. He wants to do his own thing, in his own way, on his own terms - no matter how self-destructive that proves to be.

God directs him to travel north, by land, to the city of Nineveh and warn the Ninevites. What does Jonah do? He goes west, by sea, to Tarshish. A long way away from the reach of God, or so he thinks. The psycho-analyst Carl Jung has a great deal to say to contemporary society about the turmoil and undercurrent and subconscious rebellion symbolised by the depths of the sea. By the need to go back to the womb. To the belly of the whale. His psycho-therapeutic method unfolds the need to be taken out of the restrictions imposed by your 'normal' element and environment in order to journey inwards, to stop running away, to repent. To be born again is not just religious language. Regression therapy is the language of some schools of psychotherapy. The Ancient Mariner in the poem has to re-discover himself. He has to be born again. In doing likewise, in recognising this, Jonah is far from being a failure. In many ways he is the most successful prophet after all. Jonah himself repented. The king repented. The people repented. God relented. The city of Nineveh was saved.

It was only when Jonah changed his identity and direction, he journeyed within, died to his own view of the world. It was only when he prayed and reflected on the folly of doing things his way, not God's way, did his message credible both to himself and to the people of Nineveh.

Repentance lies at the heart of the Gospel. Seeing things through the eyes of God, rather than our own limited vision. Allowing the hand of God to guide and direct us in words and actions which we would not naturally choose. As one of the prayers says during Mass "Help us to judge wisely the things of earth and measure them by the things of heaven".

This repentance, this conversion, this turning our minds and hearts in a new direction is not a wholesale, once and for all event. It involves a conscientious act of heart and will to take individual steps to embrace the reality of who we are and whilst focussing on the vision of who we might be. And, lest that contains the seeds of introversion and self-centredness, some of the greatest saints of the Church have taught us the way. St. David for example. "Stay joyful. Keep the faith. Do the little things well". St. Therese of Lisieux, who had visions of being a world missionary learned that it was in and through "The Little Way" that she was to serve God. And my favourite one of all, St. Francis de Sales: "Learn to see God in

the details of your life, for God is everywhere". As Cardinal Newman once wrote in his hymn "Lead Kindly Light":

"I do not ask to see the distant scene. One step enough for me"

Ash Wednesday falls on 17<sup>th</sup> February and with it the beginning of Lent. The words which accompany the ashes are the words of Jesus himself. They set the scene for repentance and conversion: "Repent. Turn again. (And again, and again, and again). Believe in the Gospel".

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