

Homily: Third Sunday of the Year (B) – Repentance, Restoration and Renewal

You may on occasion have watched an artist painting a picture. You will have seen him, or her, stop from time to time in their work of creation to size things up, to assess progress.

In so doing the artist is able see if he has still not got a particular area of the painting quite right, if there is some part that is not yet as he envisages it in his mind. He will know in his heart if he is not yet satisfied with what he has done: he will not be content.

The artist may actually step back from the canvas to study it overall. He wants to see if it is well balanced, if everything in the right proportion.

He then goes back to his work to develop it further, to enhance it. His fresh efforts can bring out new aspects of the picture, which so far he has not fully presented, or maybe not even thought of – until now.

In the first Scripture reading today we hear the story of Jonah, sent by God to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, a great city. The call to repentance that he makes is a call to those people to take a fresh look at the canvas of their lives, to make the necessary adjustments so as to realise their full potential. Jonah warns them that to continue to live as they are doing would be disastrous – they must change their ways.

And, we are told, the people of Nineveh realised the importance of what Jonah was saying, renounced self-indulgence and disciplined themselves *from the greatest to the least*. They made earnest efforts to renounce their evil behaviour and, happily, the impending disaster was averted.

No doubt last week many of us watched the inauguration of President Barack Obama and heard his inaugural speech. There is no need to detail its content or even cite his phraseology to recall that it was clearly an appeal - indeed a challenge - to the hearts and minds of the American people at a critical time in their history.

Moreover it was an appeal to the **spirit**, a call for the practice of various **virtues** that would restore the confidence of the nation in itself.

It was an encouragement to have a personal sense of responsibility towards the welfare of the world at large.

Much of what he said we could surely apply to our own circumstances here in this country. It is surely true that whatever practical measures are required to improve the present sorry situation for one and all these measures must be underpinned by personal commitment and a sense of social responsibility - or they will be fruitless.

There are always national concerns to address, in every generation. And in every generation individuals have to look into their hearts as well and appraise their personal attitude. After all, a nation is made up of individuals and its character corresponds to theirs.

It is important for all of us to stand back from the activity of our lives, their 'busyness', and see if we can perceive areas that are not yet right, or have latterly gone rather wrong, and seek to correct them.

We all need to weigh up the various components of our lives and see if we have got the right balance between them. We all need to discern if we are giving a disproportionate amount of time and effort to one aspect to the detriment of other important facets.

In the second Scripture reading today St Paul urges us to have the **perspective of eternity** – *Brothers, our time is growing short ... the world as we know it is passing away. If you have to deal with the world try not to become engrossed in it.*

Perhaps we have become too tied up in things that soon pass, to the neglect of what is of more lasting value – our family, our friends, our God.

Then in the Gospel we hear how Jesus called the first Apostles. Their responsiveness is very striking: *At once they left their nets and followed him.* Clearly there was a special grace of God at work in those moments to evoke such generosity and faith.

But Jesus called them to follow him more and more into loving and serving, and into deeper and deeper faith. His personal call to them was to be re-iterated many times over.

And to us also Jesus calls, over and again. There can be no 'standing still' in the Christian Life.

If we attend on him and respond to his invitations with courage and faith Jesus will bring more out of us that we ever thought was within - just as a finished work of art exceeds what was originally in the mind of the artist when he started out.

It is **in the very work** that development takes place, and in our earnest efforts at Christian Living that will be made into **more than we were** at the outset of our lives.