

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Will We Accept Forgiveness? First Week in Lent Wednesday, February 17, 2016
8:15 AM **Jon 3:1-10; Lk 11:29-32** (Seven Founders of the Order of Servites)
(Accepting forgiveness involves giving forgiveness.)

“At the judgment, the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here.”

Mercy and forgiveness is on every page of the gospels, but there is also a dire warning for those who don't accept mercy and forgiveness.

Now as I've mentioned to you before, the **story of Jonah** is a novella. It is a literary form known as irony. The Ninevites were known as the cruelest, most violent culture within the ancient Middle East. But in the story they repent at the word of a prophet. This was meant as **irony** when it was written originally about maybe four hundred years before Christ. It was **meant to spur the Jewish people into a greater fidelity to God and an acknowledgment of how they were failing to honor God.** Look at this nation. Look at this culture. You know how bad they are; but look, at the word of the prophet they changed.

Now as I said, it's a fictional story, but it doesn't have to stay fictional. The whole point was that **we can make it a true story.** This is always a present possibility because God is willing to give new life, always: at the time of Jonah, a hundred years after Jonah, four hundred years after Jonah, at the time of Christ, and ever since God is always willing. **God is always ready to make this story a true story.**

And this is the point of both readings. It's a point people often don't want to get. I've had discussions with people who want to talk about the issue of **universal salvation. That is the hope** expressed by, for example Pope John Paul, that everyone be saved. That is a valid hope, but it is only a hope. It's not a fact, as far as we know. We don't know how everything is going

to work out. We know that **we have freedom to reject God's salvation.** Do we know that every soul is going to actually accept forgiveness? No, we don't know that. And we know that **accepting forgiveness involves giving forgiveness.** That was the theme in yesterday's gospel: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive. The measure you measure out will be measured back to you." So that's also basic.

So the question is not as some people propose it, "Well, can God forgive everything?" Well, of course God can. Indeed, not only can God forgive everything, **God wants to forgive everything.** The real question is, and we cannot answer this, Will we accept it? **Will we accept forgiveness? Which is the same question as: Will we be willing to forgive those who have offended us?** And if we look around the world, as far as we can see, we can see a lot of unforgiveness. We can see a lot of hardness of heart. We can see a lot of self-righteousness. And we can see a lot of pride, all of which militates against mercy. It's not a lack on God's side. It's the lack on our side, and that's what we have to see. The author of the Book of Jonah wanted us to see it; Luke here in this gospel wants us to see it; Jesus wanted everyone to see it.