

Hard to be humble when one is always right

By JAMES K. HEALY

It was the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, and thousands of folks would converge on Washington to demonstrate their convictions on the abortion issue. Like prophets and apostles of old, they would come ready to confront authority, put their convictions on the line, risk penalties, stand up for what they believe, give witness.

Preparing to preach that Sunday, I looked for a connection between the scripture and current events. That was when I ran into Jonah in the first reading.

Remember Jonah?

When Yahweh said, "Go to Nineveh and tell those people to clean up their act or they're in big trouble," Jonah refused. He just knew with his whole being that only Jews could ever deserve God's forgiveness. So he ignored Yahweh, left town in a huff and got in a boat, only to end up in the belly of a whale for three days.

It left him a little wiser and somewhat humbled: Next time Yahweh said, "Go to Nineveh," Jonah went. Against his better judgment, he sounded Yahweh's dire warning. To his chagrin, the king listened, the people repented and Yahweh forgave. Jonah was furious. He had been itching for the wrath of God to destroy those pagans.

For Jonah, the crucial issue was his understanding of the exclusivity of God's call: Only Jews need apply. For many thousands of people heading to Capitol Hill that January weekend, the crucial issue was the exclusion of all other views on the morality of abortion. With intense passion and deep conviction, people would take a prophetic public position, many would violate civil law in the name of a higher law and some, like Jonah, would come to town ready to defy heav-

Holy Ghost Fr. James Healy, a human rights activist, is pastor of Queen of Peace Church, Arlington, Va.

en itself in taking their stand.

It would be awesome to see the intensity of those marchers who would insist absolutely on the right to life and condemn all abortion as immoral. But, as always, it would be painful to see and hear again the condemning language with which they would pronounce judgment and the promise of God's wrath upon all who disagreed with them. It would be deeply troubling to see Catholic publications print and to hear Catholic prelates pronounce words so heavy in judgment, so lacking in kindness and empathy.

It is a heavy burden God lays upon us. We must be always passionate but



never arrogant in our commitment to the truth. We must be ready to give witness, but never to pass judgment on those whose convictions conflict with our own. Inevitably, we would need to struggle with the tension between uncompromising witness and unconditioned compassion.

This Lent, we must learn from Jonah and other prophets who sometimes stumbled and got in the way of God's message. We must struggle to walk very humbly before God, to seek the truth and stand for it with passion but never act as if we have exclusive claim upon it. No matter the price we might have to pay to live according to our own conscientious convictions, we may never ever claim that our conviction, however deep, binds the conscience of another.

Advocates for life speak the truth when they insist there is increasing disregard for life in our contemporary society. They do well to sound the alarm of Christian concern in every instance where life, at any stage, is treated with less than a sense of the sacred. But no moral crisis can ever dispense people of conscience from full respect for the freedom and responsibility of every other conscience.

Jonah, an obstinate, opinionated fellow, defied even Yahweh in his blind conviction. Still, God chose to work through him. To this day, this pig-headed prophet prefigures Jesus. Swallowed by the fish as Jesus would be swallowed by the earth, he comes back alive. And, in spite of himself, he was savior to the Ninevites.

If the impassioned are sometimes impatient with immorality, it is very human. If their Jonah-call to conversion goes unheeded, they must temper the virtue of passion with the virtue of patience. They must remember there never was one among us so patient, so nonjudgmental, so ready to embrace sinners and those in error as Jesus, who is the truth. And they should draw their greatest strength from the remembrance that the message entrusted to the priestly, prophetic people is not so much a warning of God's judgment as the good news that "God is love." ■

National Catholic Reporter

NCR

MARCH 11, 1994 VOL. 30, NO. 19