

They say timing is everything. Sometimes it is. For people in business or trade it means a sale or a deadline. If you are a first responder or an emergency room surgeon or in need of one, then it's really important. And in professional sports, where a clock is part of the game, it can be very dramatic. If you are behind in the score when the clock runs out, you lose. But as long as there is one second left on the clock, you have a chance. In football you hope to catch a pass and get out of bounds for that last second field goal. And if you are the defender, you must time it just right. Too late and the receiver makes the catch. Too early and you get a penalty, allowing your opponent an even better chance at scoring. And if you're not sure what to do and you duck, well, we know how that ends.

We have a lot of examples of good and bad timing in today's readings. The people of Nineveh got it right. When they heard Jonah's warning that God was going to destroy their city, they quickly repented. Good move. Now if you only read this short section in the middle of the Book of Jonah you might think Jonah looks good, too. But no. This is the second time God asked Jonah to warn the Ninevites. The first time he refused and was awarded three days sleeping with the fishes, as they say. In his case, one "really" big one.

St. Paul gets partial credit for timing in his letter to the Corinthians. He is correct that we shouldn't spend all our time on earth partying and acquiring things for our pleasure. As the saying goes, "you can't take it with you". Nor should we spend all of it in sorrow if we can help it. For God has plans for us to use our life for the sake of the Kingdom. Where Paul got it wrong, however, was in the timing. At this point early in his missionary journeys he thought Jesus was coming back soon, very soon. Years later, I'm sure he regretted telling people to ignore their spouses and not to get married. Probably didn't go over too well.

Jesus' timing however is perfect. He comes into the world at just the right time in just the right place. He reveals himself after John the Baptist is arrested. The warm up is over, it's time to proclaim the good news. The timing of his disciple's response appears to be almost immediate, and hopefully, if Jesus called us face to face and we recognized He was both the Messiah and God, we would do the same. But there's something more important here that must happen. One must first "Repent and believe in the gospel." Now "believing" in the good news eventually turns into "sharing" the good news and "doing" good works. But what about the "repenting"? Is that really necessary? The answer is "yes". Without

repentance, we can't have the relationship for which we were created. Our sin will stop us from responding fully. Let me give you a personal example.

38 years ago this month, I went on my first few dates with Monica. On the first or second date I said something really stupid about how I thought her father was a bit autocratic or something like that. I could see she was hurt by it. She had a tremendous respect for her father. I realized after that date that my blunder was going to be an impediment to our relationship. So, I called her and apologized. In other words, I “repented” of my slight of her father. I removed the impediment. Otherwise, I don't think there would have been a third date and the 38 years of blessings that have followed. To enter into a deeper relationship with Jesus, we must remove the impediments. We must own up to the gunk in our lives and cast it aside. We must repent.

And there's another benefit to repentance. When we repent, we encounter the “merciful” Jesus. That's the very best of Jesus: His primary purpose, the one He was willing to go to the cross for. That's who Pope Francis wants the people of the world to see when they encounter the Church. St. Pope John Paul II in his second encyclical back in 1980 suggested that when we see God in this way, it brings us into a continuous state of conversion. Maybe after the sacrament of reconciliation

priests should hand out a sticker that says, “I repented and have been absolved of my sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” We could wear it around for the rest of the day and then attach it to the bathroom mirror as a daily reminder. Now I don’t mean to remind us of our sins or the guilt we were carrying around but of our God of inexhaustible mercy and tender love. I think that might inspire us to be more charitable. I mean if Jesus was willing to forgive our sins, maybe we can and should be a little more forgiving, and kind, and patient as He was with us.

I think these two fruits of repentance, removing the impediments of our relationship and inspiring conversion are why we have a penitential rite at the start of Mass. It reminds us of Christ’s mercy, and leaves us open to the inspiration of His Word which makes us ready to answer His call to “Come, follow me.”

Now we don’t know how much time each of us has left in our worldly contest. From the color of my hair it appears to be well past halftime for me. And if we should ever find ourselves struggling a bit and not sure why, just do what all the good teams do. Go back to the fundamentals, to the very first instruction.

“Repent and believe in the gospel.” *Enjoy the game!*