

## **THIRTY FIRST SUNDAY A/2005**

Our God is a God of salvation. In order to bring about salvation, God chooses some people whose task is to announce his word, to make known his Covenant and to glorify his name. It is in this perspective we have to understand the function like that of priests, preachers or prophets, etc. However, it can happen that those in charge of such a task fail to do it according to the will of God. This is what today's readings are criticizing.

In the 1st reading, the prophet Malachi accuses the priests of not heeding the word of God and performing their duties, as it should be. They have perverted the Covenant to the point that the law has become an occasion of fall. Consequently, the people in their turn have desecrated the Covenant, and betray each other while they are all sons and daughters of one Father, God. As a punishment, the power of the blessing in the name of God will be taken from them; their blessing will be turned into a curse. Whereas they should speak in the name of the Lord, make the covenant be respected and lead the people toward the good, as spiritual leaders, they cause them to stray from the right path. Therefore, they will lose the respect and the consideration of the people; they will be contemptible and vile in the eyes of the whole people.

In the same way, Jesus criticizes Scribes and Pharisees in today's Gospel, because they say without doing, they act only for being seen by people and give themselves titles which are beyond what they truly are. In fact, what Jesus is criticizing is not their job, but their behavior and their lack of commitment to the Covenant. He fights with these religious enthusiasts because their claim to virtue is in large part hypocritical. Because they were deeply religious persons, they assumed that they had the right to run other people's lives. It was against this tyranny that Jesus opposed.

This is why it is important to understand that Pharisee is not just a person, it is an attitude; it is a typical figure which represents a way of behaving contrary to the Gospel. In this context, today's Gospel is not meant to have us cursing people who died two thousand years ago; its purpose is to force us to reflect on our own life to find out if by chance the Pharisees are not "immortal", that is alive and well in ourselves. Moreover, mind you that Jesus is speaking here to his disciples and the crowd. They are the ones in danger of being "Pharisees". In other words, it is we who must feel provoked by the words of Jesus.

When Jesus says that you should follow the teachings of the Pharisees, he is speaking ironically, because in fact he is continually criticizing their doctrines. From this we see that one of the Pharisees' characteristics is inconsistency. In other words, a Pharisee is a person who says and repeats, but never does. Externally he is very religious, one who speaks of love, peace, respect for others, but in fact his/her heart is far from really what he/she is saying. My question here is this: is the Pharisee alive or dead? Does he belong to the past or is he in our midst?

As you can see, nobody can read this text without being questioned especially as priest, preacher, and catechist, etc. The readings of this Sunday can be seen as frightening, particularly for a priest. The clergy abuse scandals which are still going on are shocking for all of us, including us priests. But it is good for us to be shocked into taking a closer look at ourselves and at the results of our actions. We priests preach every week to a large number of people. If we are not practicing what we preach then we are not better than the Pharisees. But, it is not just the priests who need to be concerned about today's Gospel. We all speak about Christianity and Christian values. We all have to realize that what we say is secondary to how we live. Acts are more convincing than mere words.

Another point I would like to underline is about the way of transmitting the word of God. I have learned that to talk in public is a power even if it is about the word of God. The unredeemed situation which Jesus is addressing in today's Gospel is the human tendency to live in the prideful illusion of autonomy as a senior civil servant than the servant of the Good News of the Kingdom. When we are in that illusion about our most fundamental truth, we forget all that we are and all that we do is ultimately a gift from God. We then seek honor for ourselves rather than living the truth that all glory belongs to God. So we are reminded that holding a position of power in religion is particularly vulnerable to self-exaltation and abuse. In other words, in the announcement of the Good News, God should be put at the center of our activities. He should increase and we should decrease. Priests, Deacons, Preachers, do not announce themselves, but God. It is he who is the unique master of the work we do. Therefore, we have to approach him with humility and sincerity.

Let me finish by recalling this advice of Jesus: "Call no one Father or teacher". This statement does not mean that we cannot call our dads "father", nor does it mean that we should not call those who lead us "parish priest" or "teacher". The point our Lord impresses upon us here is that all fatherhood and all teaching comes from God; in this context they should be referred back to God and live in accord with the goodness and love of God. Moreover, because God is above all fatherhood and all teaching, when exercising such a job in his name, we should be humble and submissive to him. Hence, the greatest among you must be the servant. Perhaps the model we have to imitate today is that of St Paul. In his mission, he was like a mother filled with tenderness, affection, love and care for everybody. He considered himself, not like an authoritative father to those he has preached the Gospel, but like a brother and the servant. Let us pray that the Lord help us to put him above everything we do and to practice what we preach. As fathers, mothers, teachers, let us learn from him what is true fatherhood and motherhood. God bless you all.



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