

## **Thirty First Sunday of Ordinary Time November 05, 2017**

Malachi 1:14-2:2.8-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9.13; Matthew 23:1-12

God loves each person individually and invites each one to be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices, to be persons set apart for divine purpose. He expects every person to respond to him in a spirit of holiness and self-offering. He is a personal God who is concerned about us and has shown his care for us in the person of Jesus. Christian love is unique and is centered round God. It requires of us to root remove from our hearts these distorted perceptions about him and to convert our hearts and minds to a true and compassionate love of God and of others. Fundamentally this requires the capacity to experience each individual as a person and to show is respect as he or she is created in the divine image. The message from today's Readings tells us of God's rejection of inauthentic religious attitudes. In the first reading prophet Malachi speaks God's word to the Israelite priests after their return from exile. He criticizes the priests for the injustice and unfairness of their decisions concerning others. The Gospel passage of today is an even clearer indictment of the Pharisees, popularly regarded as models of religious holiness. Jesus criticizes them for their lack of personal coherence, preaching to others what they themselves would not do. He also condemns their vanity, searching for public praise and honour instead of offering genuine worship due only to God. In the second reading Paul tells the Christians at Thessalonica that it was in an attitude of humble service, that he and his companions taught the Gospel to them, just like a mother caring for her children.

Today's First Reading is from the Book of Malachi, probably an anonymous Prophet who preached after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon and after the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The passage begins with God expressing his personal love towards Israel. But the people of Israel did not respond to his divine love. Both the people and the priests had become lax. For this reason God was angry with Judah, Israel and Jerusalem. He was particularly angry with the priests who had been offering defective animals that were lame, blind and sick, instead of presenting their best animals as sacrifices to God. The priests were told how they had fallen from the grace of the Lord God and have brought the religion to disrepute. Not only had the priests offered secondary sacrifices to God, but they had also become sinful in their daily lives, walking away from the righteousness of the Lord. They had been negligent in their liturgical

services and had influenced others to turn away from God. They did not teach the law of God to the people because their faith and belief itself was lukewarm. The prophet offers those sinful priests an opportunity to repent and change their ways. If they will not, God threatens to send the curse upon them that is the opposite of blessing a worthy priest deserves to receive. In fact, He had already taken away the blessings of some. He was now going to make them become the scorn of other nations, abasing them before all.

In the Second Reading from the First Letter to the Thessalonians Paul speaks of himself and other Church leaders acting with genuine kindness with all possible care and protection of them. Although as apostles of Christ they had made demands upon the people, they had done so with gentleness as nursing mothers. He reminds them how gentle and kind he was while preaching the Gospel to them. He thought so highly of them that as well as giving them the Christian faith. He was willing if necessary to give his very person, his own life for them. Paul made a very special point of not seeking or accepting financial assistance from his converts as he in no way wanted to be a burden on anyone or the community. The Philippians were the only exception to this rule and from them he accepted a gift. He was a tent maker by profession and he earned his living at that trade. He often had to work at night as his day was spent in Gospel preaching. He tells them that God's message comes across as "a living power" for those who believe. The demands that Paul and his companions made upon the Thessalonians were spiritual demands. Paul had worked with them to guide them for their own personal spiritual benefit and growth. He tells them that the Gospel should never be an extra burden. On the contrary, it is meant to produce a liberating experience, a lifting of burdens. At the end of the passage Paul thanks God to the fact that when the Thessalonians received the Word of God, they did not take it as the word of men. Rather, they accepted it as it truly was, the Divine Word. Now, this Word that they had heard was at work in them. Because of the ministry of preaching the Gospel of Christ, a bond was built between Paul, his companions and the Thessalonians.

In the Gospel of today Jesus speaks strongly against the scribes and the Pharisees of his time and denounces their attitudes. In the preceding two chapters of Matthew's Gospel, the Scribes and the Pharisees were found in controversy with Jesus. They were trying to attack him on subtle points and catch him in such a way to put him in opposition to common people or political authorities. Having

silenced them through his logical arguments, Jesus tells the people and his disciples what the Scribes and Pharisees really are. He tells them that their teaching may be sound, although too rigorous at times, but their way of life, based as it is on personal ambition and pride, vitiates and ruins any merit their teaching could earn for them. He tells that the scribes and the Pharisees are occupying the seat of Moses, meaning that they had the authority to teach the Law. As such, the people were required to obey the Law. Jesus was not attacking the Law but the scribes and the Pharisees whose teachings were not in harmony with their practice. They did not put into practice what they preached to the others. Jesus had two complaints against them, namely, the harshness in which they explained the Law to the people and the conceit and hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. When they explained the Law, they would ignore the humane interpretation of it. While they demanded of others total obedience to the Law without any deviation from it, they themselves were far from observing the same. Everything they did, it was to be seen by others and to get praise. Human person was less important to them before the prescribed law.

It is important to note that, in the Gospel of today Jesus is not making an attack on all the Pharisees and all the spiritual leaders. He was aware that there were some Pharisees who were extremely good persons. Generally speaking, the Pharisees were among the most observant and devout Jews. Nicodemus, the man who came to see Jesus by night, was a Pharisee. It was he, too, who spoke to Pilate and arranged to have Jesus buried after his death on the cross. Jesus was attacking not specific persons among the Scribes and Pharisees, but their arrogant and hypocritical way of thinking and acting. Jesus attacks this mentality in three areas. First of all he says that the teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees should be put into practice because they are simply handing on the truths of their faith. But their behavior is a different matter altogether which is not the area to be imitated. They lived a double standard of life, as they said one thing and did something else. Real authority is not the exercise of power but of enabling people to do something good in freedom. Secondly, those in authority claimed special privileges: the wearing of special and distinct uniforms, the expectation that they are more deserving of certain benefits over others. They provided a clear message there about their own status and power. Thirdly, they showed that they wanted to be distinct from others and not mingle with the rest. They look for special places of honor in the Synagogue or the Temple. Again Jesus continued to condemn them for seeking such special honor because they wanted to make

an impression on the people. They loved to be greeted in the marketplaces to be known as special persons. In those days, politeness demanded that the length of one's greeting correspond to their dignity.

Jesus makes a strong observation about the way they dressed to make themselves noticed by others and respected as religious persons. In other words, Jesus criticizes their vanity and hypocrisy. They made their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. Phylacteries were small boxes that contained parchment on which was written the Sacred Scriptures. They fastened these to their left wrist and to their forehead in such a way so that they would hang in front of their eyes. This gave the appearance that their eyes were always set on the Laws of God. Then, on the four corners of their cloak, they wore tassels in observance of the Law. The bigger these were, the better impression it gave indicating that they had a great devotion. Then there was the question of titles. Having said this, Jesus condemned them for using the titles of rabbi, father and instructor. There are religious leaders who insisted on being addressed by their proper titles, such as Rabbi or the Master. They should not be called rabbi because they have one teacher, they being students. No one should be called father for they have one Father in Heaven. And they are not to be called instructor, for the one instructor they have is the Messiah. Based on this passage, some have taken it out of context and said that no one is allowed to be called father, not even the priests. First of all, in context with Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees, while they sought to be called father, their actions fell short of coming close to what is expected of a spiritual father to the people. They did not deserve such a title. Next, the people were reminded that they have one Father, one God who created them all. Since they all shared the one God, they were called to be united as one in order to belong to the family of God.

Jesus rejects three honorary titles: master, father, and teacher. If this prohibition is taken literally, then we will be unable to use the term, doctor, master or teacher in ordinary usage of life. What Jesus forbids is the use of titles by Christians for mere ostentation, arrogance and pomposity. He also wants to nudge people not to use these terms in a childish way that refuses to question authority. Titles are not to be given without recognizing that any fatherhood that one might have is in God, from whose heavenly Fatherhood the authority of earthly fatherhood derives. Jesus then repeats what he had said elsewhere: whoever exalts himself will be humbled but whoever humbles himself will be

exalted. As St Augustine said, there is something in humility that exalts the mind and something in exaltation that abases it. Humility makes the mind subject to what is superior, who is ultimately God. Exaltation on the other hand spurns subjection to anything, even what is superior. Jesus clearly indicates that there is nothing wrong in ambition. He simply turns ambition round and says that ambition is to serve instead of for personal gain, to do things for others rather than having them do for us. But to have the ambition to be the last one of all does not mean being apathetic. The good deeds of a Christian must always be for the purpose of glorifying our heavenly Father.

We are accustomed to a certain judgmental attitude in viewing others and their actions. We tend to distance ourselves from the wrongs of others and dissociate ourselves from them as if they had nothing to do with us. We tend to justify and exonerate in ourselves what we judge wrong in others and work a double standard in our judgments: a forgiving and excusing attitude with relation to ourselves, a harsh and accusing attitude with relation to others. Our Christian love demands of us to manifest God's love in our life. This sounds simple but, in practice, it is something we seldom seem to do. Christian charity also asks of us to make reparation for the sins and failings of others. So strong is the bond of Christian brotherhood that we are asked to make ourselves jointly responsible for the faults of our brothers and sisters. If Christian charity does indeed penetrate our lives, then our spontaneous attitude to the sins of others is not the cold and callous distancing judgment, but the sadness at a wrong done, the desire to take upon ourselves something of the burden of sin, and the active concern to do all in our power to help our brothers and sisters.

It is easy to read today's Gospel and start pointing fingers at others but it is important that we see how it applies to our own life. The Gospel is always addressed to each one of us and today we need to hear what it is saying to our heart at this moment. Of course, we can point a criticizing finger at all the officials we know, political, religious or otherwise, and that will make us like anyone else and not a follower of Christ. We become touchy about the treatment people give us. We cannot demand respect but must earn it. The Pharisees acted as if their teaching was their own doctrine. Similarly we must remember that we are only channels of God's Word and his Truth and have a mission to accomplish. Today's Gospel, addressed to all of us, calls for integrity and honesty, where there is no pulling of rank, no demand for respect or privilege or a hearing, no double

standards but a deep sense of equality and mutual respect, a desire to serve, to share what we have and are for the benefit all. What is difficult to tolerate is the hypocrisy which Jesus so rightly attacks and of which we are all at one time or another guilty.

A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law, and four-year old grandson. The old man's hands trembled, his eyesight was blurred, and his step faltered. The family ate together at the table, but the elderly grandfather's shaky hands and failing sight made eating difficult. Peas rolled off his spoon onto the floor. When he grasped the glass, milk spilled on the tablecloth. The son and daughter-in-law became irritated with the mess. "We must do something about Grandfather," said the son. "I've had enough of his spilled milk, noisy eating, and food on the floor." Therefore, the husband and wife set a small table in the corner. There, Grandfather ate alone while the rest of the family enjoyed dinner. Since grandfather had broken a dish two, his food was served in a wooden bowl. When the family glanced in Grandfather's direction, sometimes he had a tear in his eye as he sat alone. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food. The four-year-old watched it all in silence. One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. He asked the child sweetly, "What are you making?" Just as sweetly, the boy responded, "Oh, I am making a little bowl for you and Mama to eat your food in when I grow up." The four-year-old smiled and went back to work. The words so struck the parents that they were speechless. Though no word was spoken, both knew what must be done. That evening the husband took Grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table. For the remainder of his days, he ate every meal with the family. And for some reason, neither husband nor wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled, or the tablecloth soiled.

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