

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father--the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

REFLECTION 1: THE SEARCH FOR HONESTY

Jesus practiced what he preached.

He could always be trusted; his words and actions were perfectly integrated. However, Jesus did not dismiss the authority of the Pharisees and scribes. He instructed his disciples to 'do and observe whatever they tell you, but do not follow their example'. The reason being, that they said one thing and did another. It was for that reason that Jesus frequently called the scribes and Pharisees 'play-actors', that is hypocrites. Though he did not use that term, the prophet whom we know as Malachi (first reading) similarly described the priests of his day who had caused many 'to turn aside from the way and falter by their instructions'. The Pharisees, scribes and priests had fallen short as leaders of their people. The sacred authors highlight them for us today, not so much to assign blame but that we may be encouraged to cultivate the virtues they lacked.

In order to lead others and instruct others well, a person must be essentially honest. There should be no gap between word and deed. What one does and says in private should not differ from one's public image. We have all witnessed such gaps and differences being the downfall of many, when pre-election promises are not realised in reality. How often we hear 'I didn't mean it', 'You misunderstand me'. When accomplishments are exaggerated and facts and figures are stretched beyond reason, credibility will suffer and the public will be disillusioned. Instead of casting aspersions on others, however, we are to look to ourselves because integrity and honesty must be homegrown.

Paul in today's letter to the Thessalonians reminds us that we are equipped by God and by grace for the challenge of being honest. He affirms that those who believe carry within them the very word of God – that the word of God is 'at work' in us. With God's word working in us, we have a living handy norm by which to measure our thoughts, words and actions. God's word as uttered through the law and the prophets and as spoken and lived by Jesus, keeps us whole and holy, honest, just and true.

This month, God's word has spoken to us about taxes, caring for non-nationals/immigrants, widows and orphans, banquets, vineyards; and most important of all, about the love of God and neighbour. God's word never pressurises us, rather it challenges us by its truth and enlightens us by its wisdom. Finally and most importantly, God's word is willing to speak within us, so we will have a clearer reflection of its truth. Then, like Jesus, we will say what we mean and mean what we say. Perhaps Polonius' counsel to his son Laertes in Shakespeare's Hamlet, puts it memorably;

'This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man'.