

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011

The readings of this Sunday talk about those whose task is to bring the word of God to others. It highlights especially the consequences that befall them if they do not fulfill their duty according to the will of God.

In the first reading of the prophet Malachi, God complains against the priests who do not listen to his word and do not perform their duty according to his will. Instead of being good leaders by the example of their lives, they have become an occasion of fall for the people entrusted to them. For that reason, God will withdraw his favor from them and reject them.

This message of the prophet Malachi helps understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus criticizes the scribes and the Pharisees over their duty. In fact, Jesus qualifies scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites because they preach, but do not do practice what they teach. All their religion has become a matter of show and search for honor and human respect. That is why he recommends humility and sense of service as qualities for those who want to be leaders of the people.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the continuity of faith and the importance of the succession. As a matter of fact, Jesus has often been in conflict with the Pharisees and the Scribes. But, at the beginning of this Gospel he seems to commend them, because he invites people to obey them.

The point behind this commendation is the recognition that they are legitimate teachers of the word of God. God gave the Law to Moses who passed it to his successor, Joshua, who, in turn, handed it down to the prophets and from them to the Pharisees and the scribes, etc.

Such an evocation teaches us something about the importance of the succession inside the church. In fact, what we have today in the Church, in terms of proclamation of the word, has been handed over to us from the beginning. Therefore, the word we hear in the church is not a human word, but the word of God himself. Those who teach us have received legitimacy from the Lord and we have to listen to them even when we do not agree with them on some issues.

The second thing we learn from the Gospel is the danger of religion of ostentation. The religion of ostentation is that which is performed in order to be seen by others. It is also that which is concerned only of what people think of me and strives to keep an external image of purity, but without the heart given to God.

The religion of ostentation is equally that which is based on words alone, and not on acts. Such a religion easily becomes hypocrisy. In truth, that is a permanent danger for each one of us. We should never forget that words are cheap. What counts most is not what we say, but what we do. We will be judged not by what we say, but by what we do.

In fact, there is a tendency in each one of us to easily talk to others rather than to ourselves. We easily give lessons and orders to others about how they have to do things and to conduct themselves and we forget to do the same with ourselves. By doing so, we act exactly like the Pharisees and the scribes who put heavy burdens on people without themselves taking the trouble to carry them.

Another thing we learn from the Gospel is about the central place God should occupy in our lives and in our activities. As human experience has shown us, in fact, those who teach others have some power over them. This is true not only for human teaching, but also for the teaching of the word of God.

As beautiful as it might be, such a job, however, has some danger. In fact, there is a danger of forgetting that such a work is God's work and not ours. As true as it is that teaching gives power, we should never forget that what we do is done for the glory of God. Therefore it is He who has to be praised and honored in what we do, and not ourselves. In that perspective, all of us, priests, deacons, catechists, preachers, are just simple workers of God. It is he who is the unique master of the work we do. That is the reason why Jesus reminds his disciples and the crowds that they have just one "Father in heaven" and one Master "Christ".

What Jesus says here does not mean that we cannot anymore call those who teach us "teachers" or those who have given us life "fathers" or "mothers". The problem is all about the understanding that these titles are not exclusive, but derivative of and dependant on God who is the true master and the true father of us all. If so, there is no reason for boosting over our titles, because all glory belongs to God. That is the truth the Pharisees and the Scribes have forgotten.

It is for the same reason that Jesus invites us to humility and the specific requirement that the greatest among us must be the servant of others. Today St Paul gives us a model of such humility we have to imitate. In his mission he was like a mother, full of tenderness, affection and care for each one of those entrusted to him. He did not conduct himself in an authoritative way with regard to those to whom he preached the Gospel, but rather like a brother and the servant.

Let us pray, then, that God may help us to put him first in everything we do. Let us ask him to give us the courage to preach by our examples than by words. Let us learn from God what it means to be a good father and a good mother. May God bless you all!

Malachi 1: 14b-2:2b-, 8-10; 1 Thessalonians 2: 7b-9, 13; Matthew 23: 1-12



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Contact: www.mbala.org

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