

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2017

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of practicing the word of God. They show that those who simply preach without putting into practice what they teach run the risk of God's judgment. They invite us to live in our own lives what we preach.

The first reading describes God's complaint against the priests who do not listen to his word and violate his Covenant. It also highlights their duplicity in causing the people to falter by following their teaching. Finally, the text ends up by showing their rejection as God will curse them.

What is behind this text is the idea that the obedience to God's word is a source of blessing while the disobedience draws a curse. There is also the idea that God wants those who serve him to walk in righteousness rather than to rebel against him and his Law.

This text allows us to understand the point of today's Gospel as Jesus criticizes the Scribes and the Pharisees over their duty. First of all, the Gospel starts with the speech of Jesus to the crowds and his disciples in which he criticizes the Scribes and the Pharisees. Then, it enters into details by showing the content of his critics by referring to bad behavior of Scribes and Pharisees.

After that, the Gospel shows that though Scribes and Pharisees claim to be legitimate successors of Moses, they do not practice what they preach and do everything only in order to be seen. It also criticizes the many burdens they put on people than they are capable of bearing themselves.

Finally, the Gospel stigmatizes their search for honor and their appetite for titles. The Gospel ends with Jesus' appeal to humility and warning against pride.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today I want to talk about the necessity of practicing what we preach. Let me start with an observation about the ancient Israelite society. In fact, Israel was a theocratic society, meaning a society that considered God as a source from which all authority derived. In that society, the Law of Moses played a big role for the adjustment of the relationship of Israelites with one another and for their connection with God. In other words, the Law of Moses was very important for the good functioning of society as a whole.

In itself the Law was considered as an expression of the will of God. In the collective imagination of the people, it was believed also that the Law was the word that God himself wrote with his fingers and gave to Moses under the form of ten tablets. In that context, to obey the Law was to obey God and, thereby, to keep a good functioning of society.

Moses was the first guardian of the Law. At his death, he passed on that authority to Joshua, who, in turn passed on to the prophets and, from them, to the Scribes and the Pharisees. This invocation allows us to understand why Jesus says that, "Scribes and Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses".

It is from here that a problem comes out. In fact, instead on helping the people to reconnect with God and to adjust their relationships with one another, Scribes and Pharisees piled up so many burdens of the people that they were themselves incapable of lifting them up. In the end, it became a pure hypocrisy of just teaching the word without trying themselves to

put it into practice. It is like a policeman who speeds with his car without any consideration of the law and gives tickets to those who do the same. That is what Jesus was denouncing.

From Jesus' denouncement, let's highlight two things: First, the danger of the religion of ostentation. I call religion of ostentation 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 that which strives to keep the external image of purity without the heart given to God.

In other words, a religion of ostentation is that is based on words alone than on acts. Such a religion becomes hypocrisy. In truth, that is a permanent danger for each one of us. Why? Because there is a tendency in each one of us to easily give lessons to others than we do to ourselves, to easily teach what we do not practice. By doing so, we are not far from the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Second, there is the necessity of humility. In fact, teaching people gives some power over them. If we are not careful, it is easy to become crazy and narcissistic about it by forgetting that we do it not for "for my glory", but for the glory of God. It is God who has to be praised through what I do and not "me". I am just a simple worker of the Lord. It is he who is the unique master of the work we do.

That is why Jesus reminds us that we have just one "Father in heaven" and one Master, "Christ". What Jesus says here does not mean that we cannot call anymore those who teach us "teachers" or those who have given us life "fathers" or "mothers". The problem is not about taking in the literal sense what Jesus says. It is all about the understanding that those titles are not exclusive, but derivative of God and dependant on God who is the true Master and the true Father of us all, including of those who teach us and those who have given us life. Therefore, if we are teachers or father or mothers, it is not of our making; but of God's making. In that sense, the glory is his and not ours. That is the truth that the Scribes and Pharisees have forgotten.

It is for that same reason that Jesus says, "The greatest among you must be your servant". Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted". In other words, the true grandeur is not that which claims itself, but that which comes out of the way we serve our brothers and sisters. 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 of life than simple by words. Let us learn from him what it means to be a good father or a good mother and a good teacher. 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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