

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time A2023

In the Gospel of this morning, there are some statements of our Lord that require that we know a little bit more of the history of Ancient Israel to understand the point he is making. The Ancient Israel was a theocratic society, that is, a society that considered God as the source from which all authority derived. In that society, the Law of Moses played a big role by regulating the relationship of the Israelites with one another, their belief in God and the functioning of society as a whole.

The Law of Moses was considered as an expression of the will of God. In the collective imagination of the people, it was believed that the Law was the word that God himself wrote with his fingers and gave to Moses under the form of ten tablets. To obey the Law, therefore, 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 Judges, then 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".

That appropriation of the seat of Moses, however, was not without problem. Instead on helping the people to reconnect with God and to adjust their relationships with one another, Scribes and Pharisees added to the law so many ordinances and rituals that the people were overwhelmed. They piled up many burdens on the people than they were themselves capable of lifting them up. In the end, it became a pure hypocrisy of just teaching the word without putting it into practice. It is like a policeman who speeds without any consideration of the law, but gives tickets to those who do the same.

That duplicity is what our Lord is denouncing. He criticizes them for failing to do themselves what they teach. All their action is simply destined to be seen by people. They give themselves titles which are beyond what they truly are. For sure, what it is at stake in the criticism of our Lord is not the Pharisees' job, but their behavior, their disrespect of God's Covenant and their hypocritical claim to virtue.

When Moses was teaching, it was in the name of God. He was giving to people the message received from God. The Pharisees and Scribes, on the contrary, were speaking in their own name and communicating to people their men made precepts.

Today's Gospel warns us against those attitudes which destroy our relationships with God and our fellows. The first attitude is about the religion of ostentation. The religion of ostentation is that which is performed in order to be seen by people. It is mostly concerned for what people think of "me". It keeps an external face of purity without the heart being given to God.

A religion of ostentation is based on words than on acts. Such a religion becomes hypocrisy. For sure, the religion of ostentation is a permanent danger for each one of us. There is a tendency in each one of us to give lessons to others than we do to ourselves, to teach what we do not practice. By doing so, we are not far from the Scribes and the Pharisees.

That why there exists not only the Pharisee, but also the “Phariseeism”. This later is an attitude that tends to reproduce the model of Pharisees in our behavior. We have to examine our lives if we do not reproduce such a model in our relationship to God and others.

When our Lord says that you should follow the teachings of the Pharisees, he is ironically speaking, because, in truth, he is continually criticizing them. It would be abnormal that our Lord teaches us the inconsistency of the Pharisees. We all have to realize that what we say is secondary to how we live. Acts are more convincing than mere words.

Another attitude is the twist of teaching. I learned by experience that to talk in public is a power, even if it is about the word of God. If we are not careful, it is easy to become prideful 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 instrument in the hands of the Lord. It is he who is the unique master of the work we do and he alone should be glorified.

That is why our Lord reminds us that we have just one “Father in heaven” and one Master, “Christ”. What our Lord 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”.

For sure, they are teachers, fathers, masters, but not with a capital letter. Those titles are derivative of God and dependent on him 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. The glory of teaching is his and not ours. That is the truth that the Scribes and Pharisees had 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 by 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: 1-4b; 2: 2b, 8-10; 1 Thessalonians 2: 7b-9, 13; Matthew 23: 1-12



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