

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson  
**5th November 2023 - 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Readings (Year A): 1st: Malachi 1:14-2:2,8-10. 2nd: 1 Thess 2:7-9,13. **Gospel:** Matthew 23:1-12.

We are becoming used to hearing public enquiries into all sorts of ‘authorities’ under scrutiny and question as to their behaviour. Almost whatever utility or authority it is we hear of them not living up to their standard of expected behaviour.

We know only too well the priesthood has rightly come under scrutiny and the abuse scandals across the world are very shocking. We know too that so many avenues of life follow a similar pattern.

The gospel tells us that authorities – including religious authorities- must be respected but also challenged when their practice is out of line with their teaching.

Jesus is concerned that his disciples look at themselves and ask about their own failures. He holds up the scribes and Pharisees as a kind of mirror in which they may see their own weaknesses.

In Jesus’ words we hear an echo of the 1<sup>st</sup> reading from Malachi. This is a stinging rebuke to those priests who offer poor quality meat in sacrifices. He goes on to take them to task for their unjust and haughty treatment of others. Exasperated, he exclaims “have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why then break faith with one another.

Malachi is not trying to undermine the authority of the priesthood or indeed any other sort of authority. The prophet knows he has a message from God, and he tells that message, whatever the dangers.

Jesus then particularly warns religious leaders against hypocrisy. The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word for an actor playing a role on stage. It has come to have special associations with acting an exterior role of piety and goodness which does not match up on the inside.

Jesus firstly puts his finger on the tendency not to practice what we preach. We may be quick to point out the faults of others while we have excuses ready for our own failures.

We forget that when one finger of criticism points at another person, there are three fingers pointing back at ourselves. We criticise the splinter in our brother’s eye and fail to notice the plank in our own.

Persistent condemnation of others is usually a sign of deep personal insecurity. Whoever is humbly facing up to his or her own faults will be very slow to preach to others.

The second tendency of hypocrisy which Jesus picks up is to lay heavy burdens on others while not attempting to live them ourselves.

It is said every loud-mouthed fanatic is deeply insecure: too insecure to negotiate with enemy or opponent, for if one stone of the defensive wall is taken away, all might collapse. The motto of the fanatic is: argument weak, shout for effect. They frequently utter angry, broadside condemnations. Reflect on Gaza/Israel/Ukraine.

The third weakness of the hypocrite is to depend on marks of honour and people’s attention. The person who is hollow within has to bolster up self-esteem by outward pomposity and prestige. The basic mistake of all hypocrites is to expect to find their security through their own merits.

It is significant that, immediately after speaking about hypocrisy, Jesus went on to talk about humility. Humility comes from the Latin word for the earth. As a virtue it means having your feet set honestly in the bedrock of truth. It brings us to admit our own faults. But it does not stop there: it leads us to cast our cares upon God, and trust that he will be our hope and protection. In that way Jesus said: anyone who humbles himself will be exalted.

A paradox of the gospel is that in the Church we call our bishops 'Lord' and our priests 'father,' and our teachers 'sir' which seems at first sight to be a plain contradiction of our Lord's words in this gospel. But to arrive at the spirit of Jesus' words is to see the leader in question as our servant, representing the Lordship of the Spirit, the paternity of our heavenly Father and the teaching role of Christ in helping us all to become better disciples – learners of his way.

Today's Psalm [130 (131)] portrays the humble soul which is totally secure in God:

Gospel greatness begins in the humble recognition of our own faults and failures: then it learns that the true source of security is not what we might merit but what God's mercy offers.

The soul then delights in following the example of Jesus, who humbled himself to be the servant of all.

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