



Thirty-first Sunday Ordinary Time

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

Two messages stand out from today's readings. One concerns our attitudes towards others, particularly those to whom we have some responsibility as leaders or teachers. The other is about truth.

Actually both are related and probably are two sides of the one coin.

In the narrative Jesus is talking to his disciples and bystanders. He begins with a critique of the religious leaders. They put themselves in the place of Moses, the archetypal lawgiver yet they don't imitate Moses. They claim power-over instead of using power for the building up of the community. Jesus uses strong imagery to describe their actions. They regard the people as asses or donkeys to be loaded up with great burdens, or slaves to be used as beasts of burden. All of this is the antitheses of the relationship of Moses to his people.

The second part of Jesus' criticism is aimed at the way the leaders comport themselves. They exaggerate the design of their religious garments to draw attention to themselves. They expect and love to be in places of honour at any gathering. Their progress through town is a like a royal occasion with patronising greetings and they love to be addressed as 'Teacher'.

You can imagine the effect of such criticism on the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus then draws a verbal picture of the true disciple. The two main elements he describes are in sharp contrast to the first picture.

Jesus tells his disciples that they are called to servant leadership. Here Jesus echoes the great hymns from Isaiah celebrating the true leader. To lead means to be totally in tune with the will of God and be prepared to suffer for the children of God.

The teaching on humility is presented in terms of shunning titles. Society puts a lot of prestige around title and position. Jesus followers are to have no name other than brother or sister. All are on a par. No-one is any more exalted than any other. In this way we will keep reminded that we have only one that is our superior and that is God.

How we have lost sight of this simple Gospel precept. Our church leaders love to adorn themselves in garments which set them apart from ordinary people.

The prophet Malachi is also critical of the religious leaders. He also uses strong language. He says their offerings will be so much manure. He criticises the practice of using inferior animals for sacrifice to dodge giving of their best whist trying to look good,

God knows the heart and so knows our intentions however well we may dress them up to impress people.

We have had to listen to some hard words today so it is good to finish the beautiful imagery from Paul. He says that he could have made demands on the community but he preferred to follow Christ's example and see the members of the community as his own children. Like a mother feeding her children from her very essence.

Patricia Stevenson rsj.