

November 05 XXXI Sunday in Ordinary Time

The central theme of today's readings is a strong invitation and challenge to render humble, selfless, diligent, committed, loving service to others in the community without expecting honor or rewards in return. Today's Gospel is a warning against hypocrisy and status-seeking, given to the early Church and to our own Church communities.

In the first reading, the prophet Malachi condemns the irresponsible, proud, lazy priests of his day. In the second reading, St. Paul presents himself as an ideal example of servant leadership in a serving Christian community.

In today's Gospel, Jesus offers a word of judgment against contemporary religious leaders who are more concerned about self-promotion than service to others. Here, we see the tragedy of being religious without being the real deal, of placing primary emphasis on outer conduct rather than on inner character. Those to whom Jesus speaks did not recognize their need to be changed. These people may talk a good fight of Faith, but when they are forced to fall back upon their inner resources of Faith, they discover that the tank is empty. Jesus says, "Don't imitate them for they don't practice what they teach".

Christ-like leadership calls for integrity and honesty from all those in authority, whether priests, parents, teachers or politicians. There should be in leaders no double standards. Rather, there should grow a deep sense of equality with, and mutual respect between, leaders and those they rule. Each should seek to serve the other. Service, not status, is the mark of this new community, and true humility is the only position its members should seek.

1) We need to become servant leaders in a serving community: The Church is a servant community in which the hungry are to be filled; the ignorant are to be taught; the homeless to receive shelter; the sick to be cared for; the distressed, consoled; and the oppressed, set free. In this way, we may more fully realize their human potential and more readily enjoy life with God. Hence, leaders should have a spirit of humble service in thought, word and deed. "The measure of a true Christian is not how many servants he has, but how many people he serves."

2) We need to live the Faith we profess. We are warned about the danger of becoming like the Pharisees, laying heavy loads on other people's shoulders

without lifting a finger to budge them. Instead of judging the poor, we should be serving them both by helping to meet their needs and by working for and with them, practicing economic justice. Instead of criticizing those of other races, we should value them for their gifts, treat them as our brothers and sisters, and promote racial justice by our attitudes and in our speech. Instead of ignoring the homeless, we should be serving them through efforts to supply them with adequate housing. We need to live the Faith we profess. Our faith tells us that we are all brothers and sisters, children of the same Heavenly Father. The way to live this Faith is to help build a human community of love and justice, one deed at a time; the first step in doing this is to acknowledge our failings and ask God for help to do better.

3) We need to learn the art of self-examination: It is easy to read today's Gospel and start pointing fingers at others. Of course, I can point a criticizing finger at all the officials I know, political, religious or otherwise. But let me ask myself the question: "Am I so different from them?" It is important that I see how this applies in my own life. The Gospel is addressed to ME. How touchy am I about the way people treat me, especially if I have some title or responsibility, even if it is just that of a parent or teacher? Respect cannot be demanded — it must be earned.

4) We need to accept the responsibilities which go with our titles. Are today's readings trying to tell us that there should be no differences among us and we should drop all titles and honors? Actually, all such titles and polite forms are meant to remind each of us of our specific responsibilities in society. Each of us has a name, an identity and a personality. Today's readings remind us that whatever we are and have is not simply a birthright, but a gift given to us by God, a loving Father. In addition, the fruitful use of everything we are and have, owes very much to the generosity and care of both God and our loving neighbors for us. St. Francis of Assisi ceaselessly reminded his friars that if they could boast about anything as their own, it was their sins. Hence, let us use everything we are and have in a way that brings glory to God and His family.