

The 31st Sunday of Year A: Integrity & authority: what to do & not to do.
1st Reading: Malachi 1:14-2:2 +8-10: Priests' infidelity – effects on people;
2nd Reading: 1 Thess. 2:7-9+13: Paul's hard work for them + their response
Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12: Pharisees' abuse of their status; right behaviour.

If you are an anarchist – wanting to destroy structure in society - you will love this gospel! It seems (at a simple, superficial reading) that Jesus banned the use of the most basic 'authority' titles in public life – being called a 'Teacher' or a 'Father' or (in the Jewish system) a 'Rabbi'. (Since he was often called 'Rabbi', this seems just a little odd.)

This week's first reading and gospel reflect times of tension – and criticism of religious leaders (sounds familiar?). The prophet Malachi probably wrote in the mid-400's BC, when the religious life of the Jews after the exile was again starting to slide. He put part of the blame on priests in the Jerusalem Temple: although God's name was "*feared throughout the nations*", it was less respected among the one group you would expect to revere it - God's priests in his own Temple. The result? The prophet imagined God speaking to them: "*I have made you contemptible and vile in the eyes of the whole people, in repayment for the way you have not kept to my paths....*" This strong criticism would have hit hard the 'elite' group of temple priests. This is also a warning from the ancient past for any immoral clergy today who hypocritically think of themselves as 'superior'.

But the gospel shows an even more tense context: how the very Jewish St Matthew wrestled with the conflict between his native Judaism and the emerging and separate Christian Church. He gives us a speech by Jesus where there is an almost bitter criticism of the legal profession of the scribes, and the more general members of the Pharisee party. In Mark & Luke, there is nothing like the same degree of vitriol. After this Sunday's section, Matthew has 20 more verses of condemnation of the scribes & Pharisees. It is biting stuff. What is the reason?

Jesus' main point was their hypocrisy: "*They occupy the 'chair of Moses' (that is, they have real moral authority), you must therefore do what they tell you, and listen to what they say; but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practise what they preach.*" Jesus gave examples of their bad behaviour: they made life unnecessarily hard for people; they wore special, showy religious garb and enjoyed the social prestige and perks that went with the job.

I suspect that the scribes and Pharisees were in practice no worse than many other privileged & influential groups down the centuries. The problem was that they claimed to be morally better than everyone else (including the Temple priests, who had been criticized 450 years earlier by Malachi) because they saw themselves as the spiritual 'elite'. The religion they preached was a sort of 'D.I.Y.' – people were saved only by their own deeds; therefore, if you failed morally, this led to despair; if you 'succeeded', this often led to spiritual pride, where you felt

God was 'bound' to reward you. Elements of this outlook on life have been present in religions all through history – it is part of human nature. Sadly, it makes everything depend on us, with little room for God's forgiveness or grace.

This brings us to the more famous part of this gospel: Jesus' warning that we should not call ourselves 'Rabbi', 'Father', or 'Teacher'. It follows straight on from the previous criticism of the scribes & Pharisees. (Many rabbis were also in the Pharisees' religious party, so his comments affected them too.) Did he mean this literally? I do not think so, otherwise dads and schoolteachers down the ages would never have been able to fulfil their roles. The next bit is merely suggestion, not Church teaching; anyway, here are two ways of interpreting what Jesus meant.

The first relates to the atmosphere in which the gospel was written: as I said earlier, it was a time of religious tension. In the Jewish world, religion and the state shared similar legal systems, so that state law and religious law were closely linked. I think Iran would be a modern example of this – the religious and state leaders are almost interchangeable. The result is a fairly grim society – on the surface, appearing 'religious', but deeper down, an intolerant place, where many groups (not least most women!) feel marginalized and oppressed.

Despite his Jewish style, Matthew uses Jesus' words to warn Christians to distance themselves from the old Jewish faith (with its strict adherence to the many Old Testament rules) that was rejecting them anyway. This Sunday's gospel suggests that the new Christian leaders were not to copy the harsh style of many (but not all) scribes, lawyers, religious teachers, etc. If we read St Paul, it is clear that moving away from Judaism was a big issue for years in the early Church. For example, did Christians have to become Jews before being baptized? (This was a major debate at the start of Christianity.) How much of the Old Testament Law code needed to be kept, in the light of faith in Jesus' death & resurrection? Paul's influence helped to settle many of these issues, but it was neither quick nor easy.

A second way of looking at Jesus' words is to refer them to us. Up till about 60 years ago, fathers and schoolteachers were seen as supreme over those in their charge – especially children. (That was certainly my experience of school!) But this was never meant to be an excuse for ill-treatment, even though it sometimes happened. I think Jesus' words are not meant to say "Never call yourself a father or a teacher", but: "If you are one of these, remember that there is an authority higher than you – God - so treat people properly." This lesson was meant for everyone with authority, in all societies. But the problem now may be that things have gone too far the other way: those who have responsibilities (especially in school) are denied the powers they need to carry them out, so that they cannot help the very people to whom Jesus wanted them to be kind. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

