

Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle A

“*You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instructions.*” –  
The Prophet Malachi...

Our readings today ought to make any minister of the church and government or civic leader scrutinize the integrity of their actions and policies. Both the prophet Malachi (who speaks a warning to the religious priestly class) and Jesus in the gospel of Matthew (who criticizes the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees) refer to religious and civil leaders who “*preach* to others but fail to put their own preaching into practice.”

Unfortunately, we all are only too familiar with examples of government and religious leaders who have failed and disappointed us and of those who have even gone so far as to take advantage of our trust. Speaking only of our disappointment with church leadership, we have been made painfully aware of many instances where poor decision-making, fear, and the dishonesty exhibited by far too many bishops, priests, and lay-leaders have caused great psychological and spiritual harm to many.

These sinful actions, although committed by a small minority, have shook our church like a mighty storm and have served to distract our focus from Christ’s life-giving word and His self-gift of love to be found in the sacramental life of the church. I know that we priests, through the actions of a few, have lost your trust. Hopefully, through the healing course of time and living lives of prayer and integrity, one day faith in church leadership may be restored.

It is tragic when any of our leaders lets us down, especially our church leaders who are called by Christ to share the gospel with us. However, Jesus reminds us that these leaders are *not* the gospel. Rather, God’s action in Christ *is* the gospel – our good news of salvation.

Jesus cautions his disciples (i.e., each one of us) not to be distracted by some leaders who may not follow the ways of God. We must not allow the bad examples offered by some of our government representatives and church leaders to tempt us toward despair, for the Spirit of God desires to speak to our hearts so as to direct our lives after Jesus’ example and way of life. The

Way, the Truth and the Life for us is Jesus. This remains true even though some may create scandal (whether they be church or government leaders).

At some level, too, we know that Jesus is not just leveling criticism against the Pharisees and the scribes, these leaders with whom he has come into conflict. Jesus' words are really addressed to his disciples and to all those who profess faith in his name. Jesus urges his disciples not to follow their poor example. When we stop to consider our own actions, is it not the case that each of us has participated in creating scandal at one time or another? Don't we all at some level profess a faith that we sometimes do not faithfully live out? In this sense, can it not be said that each of us falls victim to saying one thing and doing another just like the example of the Pharisees?

The great surprise for many of us in today's gospel is that the great squabble between Jesus and the Pharisees is only illustrative of a more pressing concern for Jesus. Jesus' chief concern is not the condemnation of the Pharisees, his concern is to offer an example for his disciples, for you and me. Jesus calls all those who profess faith in his name not to follow the example of the scribes and Pharisees, but to be servants, to humbly learn from their one true teacher, Jesus. For those who follow Jesus, greatness is found in those who serve, and in the economy of God, the humble are those who maintain integrity in life and avoid showiness in leadership. The humble servant is the one who will be exalted in the reign of God.

Jesus tells us that the greatest among you will serve the rest. This past week, our nation began mourning the loss of a truly inspiring woman, and, in Jesus' eyes, a woman who reveals what it means to be servant and sister to the people of this country and of the world. Her name, of course, is Rosa Parks. This African-American woman, who on December 01, 1955 refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on the public bus, helped to touch-off the civil rights movement in this country during the 1950's and 1960's. Her act of civil disobedience took great courage, for she risked legal sanction and perhaps even physical harm.

Yet, on that cold December day in 1955, Mrs. Parks did all that she could do. She was tired of being humiliated because of the color of her skin and having to adapt to laws that

reinforced the thinking that blacks were less than full human beings. This great woman became a servant of all, a person like Christ who offered herself as an example and gift of love for others, especially to those who find themselves oppressed and without a voice. She became a servant to all of us who find it difficult to place God at the center of our lives and to learn to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Mrs. Parks shows us that we can live out the faith we profess. Living a life that struggles to do God's will is well worth the effort. Like Mrs. Parks we may have no idea how our actions and conduct may change and inspire those around us, but they *can* and they *do*. If we use Mrs. Parks as an example, we see that even those small, daily efforts made as servants of Christ, can be the spark that ignites greater faith, hope and love, in our church and world.

As Jesus' disciples our actions and example ought to make clear *who* and *whose* we are, sisters and brothers in Christ – fellow servants – who belong to God. We are disciples of Jesus called to be servants of others.

Rosa Parks go with God and please pray for us!

[Homily offered by Fr. Marc Reeves, S.J.]