

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, 5 November 2023

Scriptures: Malachi 1:14-2:2,8-10; 1Thes.2:7-9,13; Matt.23:1-12

One day at the start of a new school semester, a teacher asked the class rhetorically: "Do you know the definition of education?" She then said: "It happens when the notes of the teacher become the notes of the students, without passing through the minds of either". It is a serious point as well as being cynical.

We can fool ourselves that we are learning things simply because we are writing them down. But if we never take the time to think about what we write, then we have learned nothing except how to be parrots.

The same thing is true today about dialogue between people. We think we know what dialogue is and we probably think that we practice dialogue, when in fact all we are doing is talking. You talk and then I talk, but we don't quite listen. Then we argue and then we fight. Many people think that dialogue has been tried and found wanting, and so they stop believing in it. It is seen as more important today to speak your version of the truth loudly and to persuade others to follow your way. Our modern world has even been called "a post-truth society". Since no one can agree on the truth, some people think it is better to develop your own propaganda and to make the images and the soundbites that will get you what you want. Modern media and politicians are very aware of these powerful forces for shaping the world.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks to us about the failings of the Scribes and Pharisees, the leaders of his time. What he has to say is valid for all time and for all in authority.

So, we need to be aware of the weaknesses of human nature. People in power can become uncaring of others, especially of those who are poor, and people in power can become addicted to the advantages and privileges that come with the job.

Of course, what is true of those in public office is also true of ourselves in our own little areas of power. How often parents or teachers can become authoritarian in attitude towards the children in their care. How often people in the workplace can become rigid and rude in dealing with fellow workers. And the same can all too easily become true within the Church as well, in the relationship between clergy and people. It is easy for individuals to become dictators in their own backyards.

Jesus says we are to become servants of one another. That human expression of ours, "at your service", is a great motto and a great attitude to have in life. It encourages us to be receptive of other people and not so self-obsessed. St. Paul applauds the Thessalonians because they accepted the Gospel as a message from God. They listened to it and took it to heart.

The Gospel, St. Paul reminds us, is not some human thinking. It is not a particular philosophy or social theory that we can agree or disagree about. The Gospel is a message from the living God. It is a challenge to us every day of our lives. The challenge for us is to practice what is taught to us by the Lord. It is a living power that will purify our hearts and heal our relationships with one another—if we will allow it to enter our head and our heart.

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