

31st Sunday OT – Matthew 23:1-12

I was comparing the gospel passage with the second reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Essentially, Jesus is telling us to observe all things they tell you, *but do not follow their example*, for they do not practice what they preach.

In Paul's letter, he tells us to be, "...as a nursing mother who cares for her children." And he goes further, "With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well." That is exactly what Pope Francis is telling the priests, "You, as pastors, *must smell like your sheep.*"

Jesus concludes his activity in the Temple with a long denunciation of the scribes and the Pharisees, seemingly hard to reconcile with the Jesus who is meek and humble of heart found elsewhere. In Matthew, the Pharisees represent not only the Pharisees of Jesus' time, but also the leaders of hostile synagogues of his own time, and even members of his community whose Christianity had turned sour.

Our passage opens by seeming to approve the teaching if not the example of the Pharisees who earlier have been called blind guides whose teaching was not to be followed. The disciples of Jesus were to practice a higher righteousness than that of the Pharisees. *What was said was to be endorsed by what was done.*

The Pharisees are criticized on three grounds. First, through their teaching, they had ***distorted the Law*** which should have been a delight, "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path," easy and light like the yoke of Christ, into a burden. Secondly, they wore their phylacteries and tassels with their quotations of the Law ***to win admiration*** rather than provide edification. They were like those who performed the traditional works of pity, prayer, fasting and almsgiving, for show.

Thirdly, they ***loved titles*** which obscured the one Fatherhood of God and the one brotherhood and sisterhood of God's family. Unfortunately, we can see this today with petty argument over how the Eucharist is to be said and over how it is to be lived out in our day to day lives. We see this in dressing up in the vestments of the Latin Mass, with all the accoutrements that were added on after the centuries following the great saints such as Augustine and Jerome. And we see this in the titles that we give priests that would never work if women were ever invited into this all male club.

This section reflects Matthew's church which was truly a community of faith among equals. Though Peter had been given the keys to the kingdom, the greatest in it were the ***little ones***. The only Father the disciples have in the gospels is their *Father in Heaven*. The only greatness they were to seek was that measured by *the quality of their service*.

Jerome was called on by Pope Damasus to produce a copy in Latin for the common people of the New Testament which eventually all the responses in the Eucharist were changes to this language except for the ***Lord Have Mercy***, which stayed in the original Greek. He did this work in partnership with certain educated women of Rome. Usually that goes unmentioned in his life.

Eventually Jerome moved to Bethlehem with his retinue and continued his work on the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament, and there he established a monastery for men and for women close to each other. By then he had several of the good Roman women who joined him in Bethlehem to help him in the translations, since they were taught to read in Greek and eventually in Hebrew. He was way ahead of his time, that was why Rome was becoming uncomfortable for him and his group.

Saint Augustine, by this time, was close to death as the Vandals literally approached his city gates of Hippo, pillaging and vandalizing the countryside (for which the name ***vandal*** comes from). By now Augustine had also been living withing a community of men following his own Rule of Life in a monastic setting as Jerome. This all took place after having written his famous book, ***City of God***, with the most often quoted line, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O Lord!"

And we pray, Dear Lord, help our leaders to live as you did, without the pretensions to titles and costumes, but smelling like our sheep, surrounded by generous men and women of deep faith. May our liturgies lead our hearts to rest in you O, God, as we all walk along the way to your Kingdom *with the little people!*