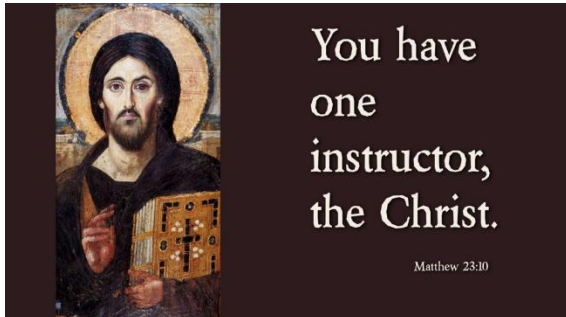


Homily - November 5, 2023
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time



There are a couple of warning shots fire over our heads in the readings today. They warn us against hypocrisy. The first shot is taken by the prophet Malachi. Even though Malachi lived about 500 years before Jesus, notice how his words are similar to Jesus' words. Malachi says, "O priests, this command is for you. Your hearts don't give me glory. You've corrupted the covenant of Levi, and you cause many to stumble by your instructions." Jesus, 500 years later, berates the religious leaders of his time, the scribes and Pharisees, with similar words, "You tie heavy burdens on the shoulders of others in the form of laws and rules. You take pleasure in seeing people struggle under the weight of these laws and you never lift a finger to lighten their load."

Hypocrisy seemed to be the only sin Jesus really loathed and was always warning people against. Hypocrisy is a form of pride, bad pride. There is also good pride like when we take pride in our hard-worked accomplishments especially achievements that make the world a better place for others. The bad form of pride is traditionally called hubris. Hubris is excessive self-admiration usually accompanied with looking down on others.

The key to overcoming hypocrisy is humility—keeping the sackcloth and ashes handy. Life, if we are open to its lessons, has a way of humbling us daily. Here's a story told by a former governor of Massachusetts. It took place a few decades ago. A woman organized a neighbourhood barbeque in the hopes of having people in the neighbourhood get to know each other better. She not only organized the event, but she was also in charge of barbequing the chicken. She made sure, so as not to run out, that each person was to receive, along with the salad and roll, one piece of chicken. When the governor of Massachusetts showed up, he moved along the line like everybody else. When he received his one piece of chicken, he

said, "I'd like another piece of chicken." The lady in charge said, "I'm sorry, we only have enough chicken to give each person one piece." He responded with, "Do you know who I am? I'm the governor of Massachusetts. I would like another piece of chicken." Without flinching, the lady responded, "Do you know who I am? I'm the chicken lady. You'll get one piece of chicken like everyone else." To his credit, though, this former governor tells this story about himself and how he needed this necessary humiliation in his life in order to become a better politician and a better person.

On our way to overcoming unhealthy pride, by way of a humiliation, we can miss the point and even turn humiliation into a contest. There's a delightful story of a rabbi, a cantor, and the Jewish janitor. The Day of Atonement came and, as required, the rabbi stood in the synagogue and did the traditional gesture. He struck his chest and intoned three times, "I am nothing. I am nothing. I am nothing." Then the cantor took his turn. In a well-modulated voice he sang, "I am nothing. I am nothing. I am nothing." Then the poor, humble, Jewish janitor, observing this, also struck his chest and said, "I am nothing. I am nothing. I am nothing." And the rabbi turned and said to the cantor, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

Bad pride, hubris, is a many-faceted evil. It's expressed in today's gospel as hypocrisy. Hypocrisy usually shows itself in two ways. One way is the way we experience people not practicing what they preach, and we inwardly say, "What a hypocrite!" Jesus saw this in the Pharisees, how they said one thing and did another—often to the harm of many.

A second way hypocrisy shows itself is even more evil. This is when people not only do not practice what they preach, but they don't even believe what they preach. They say things out loud they don't believe for some political or social gain. This is the hypocrisy that lies. It's a pride that makes us cover up our deeds with fine words. It's a pride that likes the accolades and the places of honour. It's a pride that fuels hypocrisy, and the worst kind of hypocrisy is religious hypocrisy.

It's the worst because you don't expect it from religious leaders, and maybe that's why Jesus was so hard on the Pharisees.

There's a third reality that people call hypocrisy, but it really isn't that at all. This refers not to people who don't practice what they preach or believe what they preach. It refers to a gray area that is actually quite noble. It refers to a lot of people who practice what they preach but not out of total conviction or maybe with little conviction. They warm a pew at Mass, say prayers, keep up appearances but there is something honest about them. They aren't trying to deceive anyone; they are just secretly searching.

This type of person watches the news and inwardly questions why a good God can allow so many innocent people to suffer. This type of person has experienced divorce or the death of a loved one and wonders if going to Mass carries any meaning for them anymore. This type of person offered prayers for many years and wonders why so many of them went unanswered. This type of person still goes to church, still receives Communion, and goes through the motions if for no other reason than to set a good example for their children. This type of person asks: what am I doing here? What do I really believe? I'm just not sure. I feel empty. My spirit feels dried up. Other people seem to have spiritual experiences, seem to be born again, seem to have God smiling on their lives, but I don't. I feel like a hypocrite.

But this is different. This is not the pride of hypocrisy. This is journeying and searching—noble things in the Christian tradition. This is the discipline of someone keeping up appearances, not to deceive, but to stay in the game yearning for a sign from God that God is there and really cares. These people are faithful to religious practices even when the practices say nothing at the moment. They are trying to be faithful even when they don't get anything out of it. Such people are not hypocrites. They are searchers after truth. They are beloved of God, who is with them on their personal Calvary.

This group of people remind me of a book I read about 20 years ago entitled God Underneath. It's written by a man named Edward Beck, a priest who gave up working at the stock market in New York City to follow his call to priesthood. He recalls in the book a conversation he had with his spiritual director, a year after being ordained. Edward said to his spiritual director, "Sometimes I feel like God is saying to me, 'You've got to be kidding. Go back to New York and resume your life. You'll never make it.' It's as if I'm pretending I can do this, but soon I'm going to be found out." His spiritual director responded this way, "But Edward, we're all pretending, all the time. The secret is to ask God to help us pretend less, to gradually become more our true selves. That's what conversion is. But it's a lifelong process. Give yourself a break, Edward. You're just starting out."

Sometimes in the spiritual life, you fake it until you make it. You get in line for your one piece of chicken all the while wondering why you're even at the block party in the first place. If you've ever felt like this, you're not a hypocrite. You're a searcher. Jesus doesn't look at you and say, "Hypocrite!" but, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter the joy of your Master."

~Fr. Phil