

Gospel reflections

Matthew 23: 1-12

23Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:²“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.⁴They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

⁵“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues;⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

⁸“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.⁹And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.¹Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant.¹²For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This week’s Gospel reading follows hard on the attempts of the Pharisees, the scribes and the Sadducees to trap Jesus into betraying himself either to the Jewish religious leaders or to the Roman rulers. The end of chapter 22 closes with the words, ‘And no-one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.’ (Matt 22:46)

At the beginning of chapter 23 Jesus confidently and freely addresses the issue which had been emerging in the previous chapter: hypocrisy. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and crowds of other people when he explains why he is critical of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus begins by acknowledging the authority of their words, but he condemns their actions. They do not practice what they preach. None of us like to be called a hypocrite, but Jesus provides greater depth to hypocrisy in this teaching. In placing themselves above the practice of law, a law they know better than anyone else, the Pharisees have separated themselves from their community.

The pharisees studied religious law diligently and in so doing, considered themselves to be above others in their community. Their knowledge of the law, which should have been used to be of help to the community, has instead created burdens on people’s shoulders the Pharisees are using religious law for their own purposes.

Everytime we create one expectation for some in our school community and another for others; everytime we do something purely to make ourselves look good; everytime we act simply to get noticed, we are as hypocritical as the Pharisees and in great danger of separating ourselves from the communities we serve.

Looking at the passage with this in mind, the reversal of the expected order in verses 11 and 12 is not surprising.

¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant.¹²For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. (Matt 23:11-12)

A Christian community is one of mutual service; it is one in which we use our knowledge to build and grow our community and it is one in which we serve Jesus in serving those around us.



Prayer

O Lord, Teach me your way so that I may walk humbly with you sharing your love, kindness and care. Give me strength so that I may share your greatness in serving those around me. In the name of Jesus, Amen.