

Homily For Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent - Year II

St Peter's 8:30/7:00 Masses - Tuesday, March 10, 2020

Isaiah 1:10,16-31 "The strong ... and their work shall burn together, with no one to quench them."

Psalms 50:8-23 "What right have you to take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline."

Matthew 23:1-12 "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who are humble will be exalted. "

The Heart of the Law

Introduction

The people of the region of Galilee, where Jesus grew up, were quite religious. Contrary to some opinions, the people of that region were not uneducated simpletons who didn't know their scriptures. They were generally pretty literate about their history as God's chosen people, and many had large portions of the scriptures memorized. We could wish that our culture was like them.

Rabbis in Jesus' time were teachers and interpreters of those scriptures. They were teachers of the Torah, the Law. Typically, each rabbi had followers or disciples who learned from their rabbi and sought to be like him. Jesus was pretty typical in this way. He taught his followers a way of life and not just interpretations of scripture.

Jesus explained that he had not come to get rid of the law but to fulfil it. He came to demonstrate how to correctly live in the very heart of God's law. That is why he was always stressing the importance of the right attitude of heart *as well as* the right action.

Peter provides a dramatic example of a disciple seeking to be like the teacher when he saw Jesus walking out on the water and called out to him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Peter wasn't just trying to learn a magic trick from Jesus. He was committed to becoming like him in every way.

Pharisees were rabbis who had a certain kind of respect amongst the people. After the temple was destroyed, they became the synagogue rabbis. They were

seen as having the authority of Moses himself to teach people how to obey the Mosaic law.

Matthew

With that background, we come to today's Gospel passage, where Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees reaches a fever pitch. As he tells the people there, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' chair. Therefore, do whatever they teach, but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their fringes long. They love the place of honour at banquets and to be greeted with respect and to have people call them rabbi."

Very recently, my wife and I were looking at some clergy vestments in a store. There was a very nice deacon's stole with beautiful gold tassels, comparable to the fringes on the rabbi's garment. My wife, as the voice of Jesus, reminded me that I need to be careful not to try to impress people with long fringes, so I didn't buy it. As an aside, as married deacons, we sometimes say that we are better off than priests because we have a wife to remind that it is not all about us. I said that to a priest one time and he told me he had a thousand people in his congregation who reminded him that it's not all about him. Fr Jonathan is especially lucky in this regard. He has both, so there is no chance for him to become like the Pharisees that Jesus condemns.

Now Jesus himself wore a tassels on his garment as the law required and did not reject being called Rabbi. What he criticizes is calling attention to one's practice of religion for the sake of receiving honour from people rather than the approval of God. With the power of all of the prophets of old combined, Jesus denounces the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. They teach the law, but they don't help people carry the burden of the law. Thus Jesus tells the people to do what they say, but not to be like them. They are guilty of making religious leadership more of a show than an act of service.

Scripture clearly does not condemn people being called father, or rabbi or teacher. Jesus is making the point that no one should seek those titles so as to

gain respect and honour. Instead, seek to be brothers and sisters, children of God, who is our father. Instead, seek to be like the Messiah, our rabbi and teacher in faith and hope and love.

The Journey of Lent

This is an amazing time of the year, this Lenten season. Every day is a new opportunity to turn to God in humility, to recognize the darkness in our ability to recognize the sin in our lives, and the weakness of our wills to follow a more holy way.

Isaiah's commands the people, we included: "Wash yourselves. Cease to do evil, learn to do good, rescue the oppressed. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow." Those who think they are strong shall be burned up.

The psalmist captures the heart of Jesus: "What right have you to recite my statutes? For you hate discipline. Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honour me. To those I will show the salvation of God."

Without our God at the centre of our Lenten journey, we would be quickly overwhelmed with the weight of our sin and of the judgment for it. No one, no matter how strong, could stand. Our spirits would be crushed. We need God every second and every step of the way. Let our prayer, fasting and almsgiving be a following of Jesus, our rabbi, our teacher. Let us cry out to him again and again and again, and let him save us from our sin and from our broken human nature.