

## 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday OT - (Year A) – November 5, 2017

MAL 1:14B-2:2B, 8-10; PS 131:1, 2, 3; 1 THES 2:7B-9, 13; MT 23:1-12

Believe it or not, is not unheard of for parishioners to complain that they aren't "**fed**" by the preaching at Mass!

**Some** of this **criticism** is **legitimate** because sometimes homilies at Mass leave **a lot to be desired**. After all, haven't we all endured our share of homilies that seem to **wander everywhere...but to the *point*?**

At other times, such criticism may simply be an excuse **to cover *discomfort on the part of the hearers*** because the preaching might be prodding people out of their comfort zone—**away** from sin and **toward** holiness—and ***they're not really interested in changing***.

So, to increase the chances that ***this*** homily will be **spiritually nourishing**, it starts with a "**Scripture sandwich**" with three parts—a **top...a middle...and a bottom**.

The **top** part comes from the **Prophet Malachi**.

The **middle**—the ***meat***—comes from **Jesus**.

And the **bottom** part comes from **St. Paul**, from his **2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to Timothy**.

As you listen to these three Scriptural exhortations, see if you notice the **problematic patterns** they reveal.

Let's start with the **Book of the Prophet Malachi**...where God said:

***And now, priests...you have turned aside from the way and have caused many to stumble by your instruction...I, therefore, have made you contemptible and base before all the people, for you do not keep my ways, but show partiality in your instruction.*** (Mal 2:1-2, 8-9)

Next, we turn to the **Gospel of Matthew**...

***Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe***

*all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice.”* (Mt 23:1-3)

And finally, to **St. Paul**, who wrote to **St. Timothy**...

*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead...preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.* (2 Tim 4:1-5)

In the verses from **Malachi**, God condemns religious leaders for **misleading** people with their **corrupted instruction**. In the **Gospel** passage, **Jesus** instructs his followers to **adhere** to the Law *insofar as it is faithfully proclaimed* by the Pharisees, but to avoid their **bad example**, which conflicts with their **teaching**. And **Paul** exhorts Timothy to **persevere** in teaching the truth even as many listeners **reject** the word and **follow false teachers** who suit their **preferences**...and betray their **souls**.

To sum up, then:

*Teachers of the faith* are often tempted to **appease** their listeners in order to feed their own **pride**, or to **endear** themselves to their hearers, so as to **protect** their **positions of influence**.

At the same time, the *hearers* are quite often content to “*shop*” around for **teachers** and **teachings** until they find—*not* that which actually *nourishes* them—but, rather, spiritual “**comfort food**”.

God’s **tremendously high expectation** for religious leaders is driven home forcefully in the **New Testament Letter of James**:

*Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.* (Jas 3:1)

Why will **we** teachers be judged more **severely**?

Because those of us charged to teach and preach **wield significant influence** over our hearers. But along with that great **influence** comes great *responsibility* because those who teach and preach must ultimately give an account to the Lord Jesus at their judgment for *the souls entrusted to them*.

That's why God spoke **these** sobering words to the **Prophet Ezekiel**:

*“...I have made [you] a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his [sin], but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way; he shall die in his [sin], but you will have saved your life.”* (Ez 33:7-9)

Clearly, **teachers** of the faith have a grave responsibility to **impart** God's instruction *faithfully*. But the **hearers** are expected to *respond faithfully* to the Gospel. That's why Jesus said: *“...do and observe all things whatsoever [the Pharisees] tell you, but do not follow their example”*. It becomes unnecessarily difficult, however, for the **faithful** to adhere to the Gospel, when their teachers **corrupt the proclamation** with their own **agendas**.

**St. Charles Borromeo**, whose feast was celebrated yesterday (Nov 4) challenged those charged with **teaching the faith** with these strong words:

**If teaching and preaching is your job, then study diligently and apply yourself to whatever is necessary for doing the job well. Be sure that you first preach by the way you live. If you do not, people will notice that you say one thing, but live otherwise, and your words will bring only cynical laughter and a derisive shake of the head.**

<http://www.liturgies.net/saints/charlesborromeo/readings.htm>

On the other hand, when **both teacher and hearer** live in accord with God's will—in other words, *when Christians really walk the talk*—their **faithful witness** is compelling to outside observers who are hungry for **stability** and **truth** in a world increasingly *unstable* and *false*. *Fruitful, faithful Christianity is contagious and attractive*. And joyfully-lived Christianity is the *best* form of evangelization!

As **Blessed Paul VI** said:

**Modern man listens more willingly to *witnesses* than to teachers, and if he *does* listen to teachers, it is *because* they are witnesses.**

Evangelii nuntiandi, 41

Now...to see an example of **sound teaching** which is **well-received**, we turn to the **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading**, taken from **St. Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Thessalonians**. The passage in the **Lectionary** today skips **two verses** which more fully recount the **integrity** and **love** with which **St. Paul and his companions** won their hearers over to the Gospel:

*With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us...You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers. As you know, we treated each one of you as a father treats his children, exhorting and encouraging you and insisting that you conduct yourselves as worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.* (1 Thess 2:8-12)

Here St. Paul demonstrates that, if teachers and preachers are to be effective in bringing about the **conversion** of the people entrusted to them, they must **love** their people enough to **speak and teach** the truth, while also **modeling** for their listeners the very holiness that they demand.

**St. Paul's** joy over the **response** of the **Thessalonians** is undeniable:

*...we... give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe.* (1 Thess 2:13)

It's obvious that a tremendous responsibility is placed on the shoulders of those whom the Lord has appointed as teachers. **But Jesus also commanded a faithful response on the part of the hearers.** It is not enough to simply **take in** the message. **Christians are called to put the teaching into action**, so that the word of God, **at work in the believer**, draws others into the Light of Christ.

That is why **St. James** wrote in his **New Testament Letter**:

*...be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.* (Jas 1:22)

There's a famous quote—often attributed to **St. John Vianney**—about the

**relationship** of a **parish priest** to the **people entrusted to him** which is fitting for our reflection today:

**If the parish priest is a *Saint*, his people will be *holy*; if the priest is *holy*, but not yet a *Saint*, his people will be *good*; if he is *good*, his people will be *lukewarm*, and if he is *lukewarm*, his parishioners will be *bad*. And if the priest himself is *bad*, his people will go to *Hell*.**

<http://www.catholictradition.org/Priests/priests2.htm>

By now, it should be evident how *interdependent* teacher and hearer are. It's clear that the **receivers** of the teaching depend on their **leaders**.

But **the faithful must also *intercede* fervently for their leaders**, so that those who teach the faith will not fall prey to the **pride, power and prestige** dangled before them by the devil. It is essential to **hold** your religious leaders in your *prayers* but not **place** them on a *pedestal*, because it is much more tempting than you might think for teachers of the faith to **promote *ourselves***...and not **God**.

Holiness is not guaranteed by **authority**. Holiness is a product of **humility**. And humility is dependent on a healthy sense of our **spiritual poverty**—the understanding that we are **nothing without God**. A humble Christian—**whether teacher or disciple**—who depends completely on the grace of God to live out his or her vocation, can say with St. Paul:

***I can do all things in him who strengthens me.*** (Phil 4:13)

If we ***exalt ourselves***, like the Pharisees did, we begin to believe and act as though we really have **no need for God**. If we ***humble ourselves***—realizing that ***“apart from [Jesus] we can do nothing”*** (cf. Jn 15:5)—then Jesus is delighted to **supply what we lack** so that we can do our share of the work in building his Kingdom.

Jesus said, ***“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”*** (Mt 23:12)

Whoever is exalted—***by God***—becomes an irresistible magnet drawing others to the peace, joy and salvation which Christ came to give us...in **this life**...and into **eternity**.

And **that's** a teaching we can all take to heart.