

HOMILY SUNDAY 31-A
“The Humble Shall Be Exalted”

(Malachi 1:14 – 2:2, 8-10; Psalm 131; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13; Mt 23:1-12)

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Sr. Therese Arcand was a Métis Grey Nun in Île-à-la-Crosse who had a warm sense of humor but was also a bit intimidated by authority. She did a favor for her provincial superior when she came to the North for a visit. The superior’s reaction was to tell her that she would have another jewel in her crown when she got to heaven. Sr. Therese, in her nervousness yet trying to appear knowledgeable of scripture, replied that it would be harder for needle to go through the hole of a camel than for her to get into heaven!

Pray for the gift of faith that expresses itself through humble loving service.

The Old Testament prophet Malachi (which means messenger) was loyal to the Jewish religion of his time. He was aghast at the abuses in the church and society of his day: Jewish men were divorcing their wives and marrying pretty foreigners; the rich were often cheating the poor; there was much bickering and power struggles within the Church as well as sloppy liturgy, indifference, unrest and injustice. Malachi sought to restore especially the holiness of marriage.

In the gospel today Jesus complains of legalism and vanity in a similar fashion. Scribes were known as the “separated ones” who dedicated their lives to one long observance of Judaism in its most elaborate, ceremonial and legalistic form. They could be both totally dedicated, and totally legalistic. However, they turned a religion based on reverence and respect into an intolerable burden.

Phylacteries are small boxes containing Exodus 13 and Deuteronomy 6, worn on the left wrist and the forehead as “a sign on the left hand and between the eyes” - a literal keeping of the law. *Tassels* were worn on the cloak as a sign of devotion and as a reminder of the commandments. The *greeting* was long in keeping with the status of a person.

The design of the Pharisees was to dress and act so as to draw attention to them selves, whereas the whole design of Christians is to dress and act so as to glorify God the Father. Any religion which produces ostentation in action and pride in the heart is a false religion. Matthew insists that the followers of Jesus should remember that they

have one teacher only, Christ, and one father in faith, God.

Matthew's great concern with these titles indicates that a problem has arisen. Leaders were abrogating titles for themselves and turning the servants of the brotherhood of Christ into a hierarchy. Our Catholic Church in particular might reflect on its use of titles. Completely contrary to all this haughty leadership is the true style of Christian leadership and greatness, and that is humble service.

The point Matthew is making is that the members of the Christian community are members of the family of God, where distinctions emphasized by titles are inappropriate. The term *Father* is Matthew's favorite designation for the deity, reflecting the distinctive practice of Jesus. Here as elsewhere, externals such as titles are only pointers to an inner attitude, which is the real target of Matthews' concern, a humble rather than a proud attitude.

This addresses our very human need to belong, to be accepted by others, to be recognized socially. This need can lead to a self-centered way of life that seeks to exalt one's self in the eyes of others. Matthew proposed an alternative world, a world seen from the perspective of the kingdom of God, an alternative family where the approval of God removes the heavy yoke of self-justification.

Jesus insists that true leadership and greatness is all about humble service. The humble servant will be rewarded, while the self-seeking ruler will be condemned. Our lives as followers of Jesus must be ultimately lives of humble selfless service.

An example of this humble selfless service is happening right in my own family. My older brother is dying of terminal brain cancer and my sister-in-law Judy has made a decision to take a leave of absence from her work to care for her husband at home. That is no small task as his health has deteriorated to the point where he needs constant supervision and attention. What has helped her is a comment by her pastor in one of his homilies that Christian life is ultimately one of service. She now sees her purpose in life as serving her husband Louis as best as she can.

Here are some ways that we can deepen our own commitment to living lives of humble service. We can begin with humble listening, being really attentive to others, especially in our own family. We also need to know and admit the truth about ourselves and share that in reconciliation, if need be. We can then strive to give up our stubborn self will and share power and control. Lastly, we can affirm, praise and compliment others, seeking to draw out their goodness and gifts.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a humble meal. It is all about Jesus going to the wire for us, giving up power, glory, control and honour to the point of death so that he could feed us, nourish us and touch us with that kind of love that will empower us to be humble servants building up a kingdom of justice, respect, peace and love.

So let us, during this celebration, pray for the gift of humble faith that expresses itself through humble loving selfless service.