

Reflection for the 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle A

The lectionary translation of the readings for this Sunday can be found at <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/110523.cfm>

1st Reading: *Mal 1:14b-2:2b, 2:8-10*

Malachai prophesied after the Babylonian Exile, after the temple had been restored. By his time the people, and especially the leaders had already become lax in their performance of ritual. This selection addresses the laxity of the priests.

2nd Reading: *1 Thes 2:7b-9, 10b*

This selection from Thessalonians is a continuation from the last two weeks. Paul is still praising the Thessalonians. He uses intimate terms to express his feelings for them and expresses his joy at how they have received the Gospel. Notice that he says the Gospel is at work in them.

Gospel: *Mt 23:1-12*

"The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Mt 23:11-12

Gospel Reflection:

So let's talk about humility. I know a lot about that subject. I'm the most humble person I know... Yeah, humility is one of those things you really can't brag about. Right?

Either way, I think the basis of being humble is living the truth. And, we should start with the first truth. The first truth is that we are all creatures, creatures of the one creator God... all of us.

The second truth proceeds from that. We are all equal under God. God didn't make some people better than others. We are all different. We have different personalities, skills, and capabilities, but we are all equal under God. In his new book, David Brooks says we are all equal on the soul level. (How to Know a Person p. 31) His might be a way of expressing it that anyone can grasp. That radical equality is why, in this Gospel selection, Jesus says, "...do not be called Rabbi. You have but one teacher and you are all brothers." Mt 23:8 In fact each of the prohibitions, do not be called Rabbi, you have but one Father, do not be called Master, is about our radical equality under God.

Humility is based on these two truths. Humility is not about making yourself seem less than others. That is false humility. Humility is about living the truth that we are all equally important. C. S. Lewis is quoted as saying "True Humility Is Not Thinking Less of Yourself, It's Thinking of Yourself Less." and, Mark Twain evidently said, "Humility means accepting reality with no attempt to outsmart it." These two seem to understand that humility is living the truth about yourself.

So what is the effect of being humble? It allows us to actually hear the other. We hear what they are saying. We hear what they are feeling. We hear why they feel the way they do. We see life, at least partially, through their eyes. And, we take all of that into consideration when we make decisions

about what actions we will take in our lives. Humility is the opposite of divisiveness. It allows us to embrace each other... in our differences.

We desperately need humility in our divided world today. We need to see each other as equals under God and we need to start hearing the other. We can't legislate that but we can begin to practice it in our own lives. And we can teach it to our children.

Maybe we can begin by reflecting on to whom we have trouble listening and why. Who do we automatically put on the list of being unworthy of our consideration, maybe it is a socio-economic group, or an ethnic group, or a political group, an individual, or whatever. Then I can ask myself what it is that makes me so arrogant that I refuse to give them the right to be heard. Then I can ask myself what it's going to take for me to really hear them.

Remember, I'm not talking about agreeing with people. I'm talking about having the humility to really hear them, what they are saying, what they are feeling, and why they feel that way. As this Gospel points out, that's our Christian duty.

If you are serious about making this Gospel a reality in your life, check out David Brooks' recently published book about how to hear the other. It's called "How to Know a Person". It is available from Amazon. It is all about how to hear the other and I highly recommend it.

Personal Reflection:

"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Mt 23:12

Question:

What words or phrases grabbed your attention during the Liturgy of the Word on Sunday? What connection do those words or phrases have to your day-to-day life? (Why do you think they grabbed your attention?) What might God be trying to say to you through these words or phrases? What response should you make? What action should you take?

Alternative:

Reflect upon/Share about your experience of not being heard, of not being seen. What could the other person have done to make you feel worthy of being heard? Do you listen to others that way, make them feel worthy of being heard? How can you improve your ability, through listening, to help other people feel that they are cherished children of God?

Verse by Verse:

Mt 23:1-36 | The chapter from which today's selection comes is the conclusion of the controversy stories and an introduction to the eschatological discourse that follows (see Mt 23:36). (JBC)

Mt 23:2 "...have taken their seat on the chair of Moses." | This means that the scribes and Pharisees have the authority to interpret the Law of Moses in the Jewish community. There may have even been a stone seat in front of the synagogue where the authoritative teacher sat. (UBSH)

Mt 23:3 "The tie up heavy burdens..." | This speaks of the rules they devised and required people to follow in observing the law. Some were difficult to follow. (UBSH)

Mt 23:5 "phylacteries" | Phylacteries are small leather boxes, strapped to the forehead and arm during morning prayer. (SP) They contain small parchments of Ex 13:1-16, Dt 6:4-9 (the shema) &

Dt 11:13-21. (SP) They fulfill commands found in Ex 13:19, Dt 6:8 & Dt 11:18. They are designed to help the Jewish people remember the Law. (UBSH)

Mt 23:5 “tassels” | Tassels are specially knotted strings attached to the corners of an outside garment. The wearing of tassels fulfills the command found in Nu 15:38-39 and Dt 22:12. They are also intended to remind people to keep the law. Jesus wore these as is indicated in Mt 9:20 and Mt 14:36. (UBSH)

Mt 23:8 “...do not be called rabbi...” | The Hebrew word *rabbi* literally means “my great one”. It was in use exclusively as an honorific title for teachers during Jesus’ lifetime. (UBSH) The only time Jesus is called rabbi is by Judas (Mt 26:25, 49). The Sacra Pagina Commentary on Matthew says that Judas’ use of the term is pejorative.

Mt 23:9 “Call no one on earth your father...” | This is not referring to the use of the word father for the father of a family. It is speaking of using the word as an honorific title to address someone of higher rank. (UBSH)