

THE EMMAUS SERIES

31st Sunday, Year A

Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10

1 Thessalonians 2: 7-8, 13

Matthew 23: 1-12

You have only one teacher, the Christ

Good leadership is essential, if human associations are to achieve their goals. God's ultimate designs for the human family are carried forward by the human communities called to be God's collaborators – first, the people of old Israel, and now the Church, the New Israel. The readings of today's liturgy remind us that many problems in the history of God's people have been caused by flawed leadership. The corrupt rule of the kings of old Israel and their disregard of God's covenant are notorious in Old Testament history. In our first reading, the 5th century B.C. prophet, Malachi reproaches the priests of the temple for the scandal they are giving the people – showing partiality; offering 'stolen, lame and diseased animals' in sacrifice (Malachi, 1:13). The conflict that will lead to the rejection and execution of Jesus is provoked by leaders who are blind to the truth he brings. Paul's concern to leave an example of selfless leadership in his ministry to the Thessalonians was motivated by his knowledge that the Church would suffer if its leaders did not exercise a leadership that was inspired by the Saviour's example.

Today's gospel reading tells us how the community for whom Matthew wrote recalled the Saviour's teaching concerning leadership of God's people. The leadership Jesus criticised was the outcome of a complex development. There was no single authority that interpreted the faith of old Israel. The Law of Moses, the torah, was handed down in the biblical traditions as the expression of God's authority. The priests of the temple were the traditional custodians of the rituals that gave expression to the people's covenant obligations. The teaching of the prophets was a spontaneous expression of guidance, like a conscience of the nation. The scribes were students of the Law who interpreted its contents. The Pharisees formed a popular movement, seeking to revive the nation's religious practice. Jesus acknowledged that it is these various groups who 'occupy the chair of Moses' – if the Law is to be interpreted faithfully, it is only these various authorities who can provide this interpretation. He criticised them, however, because they 'do not practice what they preach'. His criticism echoed the age-old teaching of the prophet. If they had the true spirit of the covenant (that should have been the very soul of Israel's faith) they would not interpret what the covenant required of God's people in a way that made it next to impossible for the common people to give faithful observance. Though they should have helped the nation to be one family under their 'one Father in heaven', they interpreted the Law in such a way that their elaborate observance gave them an elite status - which they celebrated by wearing the trappings self-importance and seeing themselves as deserving the admiration of the common people they despised.

In the stern words of Jesus we have another example of a peculiarity of the Aramaic idiom that is puzzling to our ears – its lack of a manner of expressing a qualified negative. Clearly, Jesus is not denying the role of 'fathers' and 'teachers' in our human life. He is condemning the elitist pretensions currently being associated with such terms by the scribes and the Pharisees. Heeding the teaching of Christ, God's people will recognise their fundamental equality before their common Father. Those called to positions of leadership among them will make themselves 'the last of all and the servants of all' (Mk 9:35); and all those who claim to be committed followers of the Lord must be on their guard against the spirit of self-importance that can be so damaging to the life of the Christian community.

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