

**Homily for October 31, 1999  
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Malachi 1:1b-2:2b, 8-10  
1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9,13  
Matthew 23:1-12**

## *We are to be real – sincere.*

Ever since my ordination I have been a little uncomfortable with Jesus' words about certain persons who are identified in Matthew 23 as Scribes and Pharisees. "Do what they tell you," Jesus says, "but do not follow their example."

They talk the talk, but they do not walk the walk. In fact, they bind up other people with impossible burdens, and they will not lift a finger to help them. These are the people who work in the limelight where their performances can be seen. They eagerly bear the marks of prestige, obtain the place of honor at banquets, take the front seats in church and seek public respect. They aren't real. They are insincere. In fact, our gospel is in two parts...the first section strikes at the inauthenticity and lack of service on the part of the Pharisees who are excluding the early Christians. The second part, beginning with the words: "As for you, do not be called Rabbi." -addresses the young Christian community itself where all was not sweetness and light and where there were those among them who were as insincere as the Pharisees attacking them. No matter how you shake it, the Christian ideal was for leadership to be one of humble service.

This is hard-hitting stuff; especially if you sit up front every Sunday and now and then can be found ensconced at the head table. But what really lands a punch on the chin are Jesus' words: "As for you, avoid the title 'rabbi,' only one among you is your teacher, the rest are learners. Do not call anyone on Earth your father. Only one is your father, the one in heaven. Avoid being called teachers. One is your teacher, the Messiah."

Well, at least I'm not a rabbi. But people do call me teacher at times. And I'm addressed as "Father." And sometimes I have at least acted as if I'm the Messiah. When I take the lower place at dinner, I wouldn't mind if someone came up and said, "friend, go up higher." And if I've ever "humbled" myself, I suspect that the words "whoever humbles himself shall be exalted" lurk somewhere in the closets of my mind.

Obviously the Church does not take these words literally – after all, we do refer to our biological dads as "father." ...But Jesus' words give us pause. Clearly he is talking about the danger of putting anyone in the place of God. Surely he is warning us against the tendency to set up a guru or a master as a solution for life's problems. And there is no doubt that Jesus is reminding all of us that we should not pose as the savior or master of anybody.

More to the point, however, is that Jesus is calling us to authenticity – to be real. Jesus' challengers were adept in the art of using external appearances to good advantage. In addition to a fondness for huge tassels, they made much of their phylacteries; that is, small boxes of scripture quotations. These kept the word of God close to their minds and wrists, literally. Jesus condemns limiting our response to God's goodness to external ceremonies. It is never enough to obey laws and rules without loving God with our whole heart and our neighbor equally so. Perhaps this was the failing of some of the religious leaders of Jesus' day, within the early Christian community as well as in the Jewish tradition from which they were being excluded. And it is the same problem in our own time: namely, demanding rigorous religious observance from others yet failing to fulfill God's laws from the heart.

Thus the petition in our opening prayer for this Sunday makes sense: "God of power and mercy, only with your help can we offer you fitting service and praise..." It is possible that we are not true followers of Christ until we realize the truth of that prayer. Because the temptation to use the service and worship of God as a way to put ourselves forward is always with us, we cry out for God's help: "May we live the faith we profess." This petition may well be the secret of genuine religious practice for all Christians.

If we wish honor or pre-eminence, let it be in service, rather than in being served. If we aspire to be number one, let us be the first to forgive, to heal, to minister.

The journey to this table opens us to become as humble as this bread and wine – and thus so invaded by God that we touch the lives of others as Jesus does.

The Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu, a great respecter of mystery, writes in the Hua Hu Ching, "The

highest truth cannot be put into words. Therefore the greatest teacher has nothing to say, he simply gives himself in service, and never worries." These words remind me of another story wherein the disciple visits his rabbi, not to hear anything he might say, but to watch carefully how he ties his shoelaces.

**We are to be real – sincere.**