

Sunday, October 30, 2011
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

He emptied himself and took the
form of a slave (Philippians 2.7)

After his conversion to Christ, Japanese social reformer Toyohiko Kagawa gave up his comfortable home and went to live in the slums of Kobe. There he shared himself with the needy. He gave away all his clothing, keeping only a tattered kimono. On one occasion, even though sick, he preached to people in the rain, repeating over and over, God is love! God is love! Where love is, there is God.”¹ Tattered clothing versus long tassels, living in the slums in contrast to marks of honor and recognition, and giving away himself instead of self aggrandizement were the marks of this disciple of Christ who emptied himself in the manner of Christ himself.

Again and again the Scriptures call us to the following of Christ in the way of humility, honesty and the self emptying love of God and our neighbor . In our first reading, the prophet Malachi denounces the priests for their impious ways as well as neglecting to instruct the people they were called to serve and so lead them into sin. Temple worship had become meaningless. In other passages of Malachi, the prophet echoes God’s indignation at the sight of a degenerate worship. The people together with their priests offered in sacrifice what was useless: sick or even stolen animals, food fit for nothing else but to be thrown away. The priests and people alike did not take God seriously.² They would not have treated a royal official in this way. The attitude of the priests and the visible decline of the cultic worship were outward signs of the decay and corruption in the hearts of the worshiping community. Idolatry, adultery, injustice, and unrighteousness were the fruit of their alienation from God.

In the Gospel, Jesus did not attack the authority of the scribes and Pharisees. They occupied the chair of Moses, that is they have the authority due them as leaders. Jesus attacked them for their hypocrisy. The display of their piety was not directed to the glory of God but to underline their own importance and worth, to increase their social status. They lived completely in the world of externals (widened phylacteries, long fringes and prayers) and neglected the inner world where the love of God and of neighbor arises and develops. In place of the love of God and neighbor, they loved themselves and the honor they received.

True worship means total self giving to God and neighbor, giving God the glory. As foundational to the Christian life, St. Paul told the Romans: “Love one another with the affection of brothers. Anticipate each other in showing respect...Look on the needs of the saints as your own, be generous in offering hospitality. .. Rejoice with those that rejoice, weep with those that weep. Have the same attitude towards all. Put away ambitious thoughts and associate with those who are lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation” (Rom 12: 9-16). This rule of Christian life meant for both leaders and members of the community will be found again later in the famous chapter 72 of the Rule of St. Benedict.

In contradistinction to the priests the prophet Malachi chastised, and the hypocritical leaders Jesus confronted, St. Paul gave us another, a different manner of leadership drawn from his own experience. He was aware that he had to live the gospel he preached. Failure to do so would drive away the very ones he tried to win for Christ. We can see the unfortunate results of such a failure in the recent scandals within the church. The saints who mirror Christ will, on the other hand draw others to Christ. St. Paul’s attitude towards the members of his communities was not superior and authoritarian, but that of a tender, caring mother. He was indeed a leader of the community, but like any body there is a necessity of a variety of ministries for the good order and health of the body. He, as well as the other apostles lived out their message by sharing their life in dedication and service to a people they dearly loved. In addition, St/ Paul was self supporting so as not to be a burden to the people he served.³

Today’s warnings have special relevance to those who exercise the ministry of authority in the church. But the Word addressed to the community today is for all of us. The reading from Malachi has been selected in order to shock us awake from any routine formalism in our worship, a constant danger, or to give the lie to our worship by our actions⁴ We are called to remember the humility with which we are to approach God and a service which continually goes out to others. Jesus challenged hypocrisy in the leaders of his day and I dare say we often enough detect in ourselves that our faith, our words, and our actions do not always match up. But as long as we are honest, emptying ourselves before God and keep struggling to follow the path Christ has walked ahead of us, his grace, and his presence will be there to transform us. “And may he bring us all together to everlasting life” (RB 72: 11).

¹ Mark Link, *Challenge 2000* (Allen, Tx, Taylor Publications, 1993) 384.

² *Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year*, volume 4 (Collegeville, Minn, The Liturgical Press, 1992) 236

³ Roland J. Faley, *Footsteps on the Mountain* (N.Y., Paulist Press, 1994) 699

⁴ *Days of the Lord*, 237-238