

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Malachi 1:14B-2:2B, 8-10
<i>Response</i>	In you, Lord, I have found my peace.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 131:1, 2, 3
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 2:7B-9, 13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You have but one Father in heaven and one master, the Christ.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 23:1-12

The 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time for Matthew's Gospel brings us to what I think might be one of the most difficult passages to be preached in the entire liturgical year for Year A. It's Jesus' famous teaching, "call no man father." And one of the reasons I think this is a difficult text is because, as I'm sure you know, in Catholicism, especially in the West, we have a custom that goes back many, many centuries of referring to priests as father, as addressing priests as father. And so I have had the experience of being in the congregation on the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time and the priest reads the words "call no man father," and we all get a little uncomfortable because we all call the priest himself father. So what we are going to do today is we are going to look at this particular gospel for this Sunday in Ordinary Time and, as usual, try to unpack it by putting it in its original context. I think in this text in particular, as you are going to see, although it sounds like Jesus is absolutely prohibiting the very custom that we Catholics carry out when we talk about our priest and when we address our priests as father, the context is going to make clear that that is not the case. Instead, he is giving us a very important lesson about another issue that is going to be key to his disciples. So let's begin in Matthew 23. The Gospel for this week is from verses 1-12. I am going to read the whole thing and then we will unpack it.

Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by

men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.¹

Let's stop there. What is going on in this passage of Jesus? Let's make just a few points here. First and foremost: context. You see from the very opening verse that Jesus is speaking to the crowds, but he is also focusing his words on his disciples. He's addressing a particular group within first century Judaism known as the scribes and the Pharisees. We've seen them before in the Gospel of Matthew. The scribes were the professional teachers of the law. They were trained to copy the Scriptures, but also to interpret the Scriptures for the people. The Pharisees were a very strict sect within Judaism. Their Hebrew name *perushim* means the separated ones, and they were known for their strict fidelity to the Jewish law. They also were basically the most authoritative and powerful group within the Jewish people of the first century A.D. So for example, Josephus tells us that although there were different Jewish sects like the Essenes, who lived by the Dead Sea, and the Sadducees, many of whom were in the priesthood, or the zealots, who were political revolutionaries; Josephus tells us that the Pharisees were the most influential. The common people, the majority of the Jews, followed the teachings of the Pharisees. Jesus confirms that here and he gives us a little more of a window into it.

So he tells his disciples, this is striking, he says look, the Pharisees and the scribes sit on the seat of Moses, so do whatever they tell you. Pause there. What does that mean? They sit on the seat of Moses? Well the Greek word here is *kathedra*. We actually get the word cathedral from this in Catholic tradition, because the Cathedral is the seat of the Bishop of the diocese. It's a symbol of his authority as

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

the authoritative teacher of the diocese, and the Cathedral is the bishop's own church because it has the bishop's chair. Well that image of a chair and authoritative teaching is straight from Judaism. In the synagogues in the first century A.D., they would have a seat called the *kathedra* (in Greek), the seat of Moses. Whoever was interpreting the law of Moses would sit on the seat of the *kathedra* of the synagogue and teach the people in an authoritative way. So what Jesus is saying to the apostles here is, look, the Pharisees and scribes sit on the seat of Moses. They are the authoritative teachers of the Jewish people, so you have to do whatever they say. Now that alone is remarkable, that Jesus teaches his disciples to be submissive to legitimate authority under the old covenant. He hasn't instituted the new covenant yet. That's going to take place at the Last Supper. So he tells them, do what they say but don't do what they do, because although they teach the law of God, they don't actually practice it themselves. They don't practice what they teach. That's the famous saying, practice what you preach, do what you teach. That's the problem with the Pharisees. So essentially the Pharisees are the example of religious hypocrisy. They know the truth, they even teach the truth to others, but they don't follow it themselves, which means that many of them are then a corrupt religious authority. They are leading the people by teaching the truth, but not leading them by doing the truth.

Jesus goes on to explain the situation. What he says is that these Pharisees bind heavy burdens, but they don't lift them themselves. So they lay them on other people's shoulders but they themselves don't lift a finger to carry them out. What's the imagery there? Well if you recall in Matthew 16, Jesus gave Peter the power to bind and loose, whatever he binds on earth is bound in heaven. That's a Jewish way of talking about teaching authority, binding teaching. So what he's saying here is that the Pharisees will bind all the other Jews in their teaching, which is authoritative, but they themselves aren't following it. They're not going to make the slightest effort to carry out their own teaching. So what Jesus is doing with the Pharisees here is trying to give the apostles an example of hypocritical leaders. That's the first point.

The second point has to do with a desire for praise, or a kind of spiritual pride. This is where he gets into some interesting issues. In the next verses he said that they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. What in the world does that mean? Again, this is one of those examples of how the evangelist, in this case

Matthew, assumes that you are a Jewish audience. In other words, he assumes that the Christians he's writing for are Jewish Christians, that they understand Jewish customs, because the phylacteries refer to basically a leather prayer band the Jews would wrap around their arms that would contain little copies of the Scriptures. For example, the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-6), which God says, you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength, the Lord is one. That famous Jewish text would be copied out and then put into a little leather box and the Jews would wrap the box around their hands with something called a phylactery, basically a leather band. When they would wrap their hands with that, then they would pray. It would be a way of focusing the mind to do their morning and evening prayer. You can still see Orthodox Jews use phylacteries to this day in order to pray. The Hebrew there is *tephillin*, that's what these were called.

Then he says they make their fringes long. What are the fringes? In Hebrew these fringes are called *tzi-tzith*. They're actually referred to in the book of Numbers. They were basically tassels at the edge of the cloak, at the bottom of the cloak. The Jews would wear these tassels that were meant to remind them of the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20. Not to commit idolatry, not to break the Sabbath, all the basic laws of the Decalogue. And so these tassels were an outward sign of an inward obedience to the Commandments. What I think is cool about this is that Matthew has already mentioned fringes earlier in the Gospel. So if you turned back to Matthew 9:20, it's the famous story of the woman with a hemorrhage, and in that Gospel, which we saw earlier in Matthew 9: 20, it says, behold a woman who has suffered from a hemorrhage for 12 years came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his garment. So what is that? Well it doesn't just mean the hem. It doesn't just mean the edge of his garment. It means the *tzi-tzith*. The little fringes that extended from the hem of the garment that were meant to remind you of the Commandments. I think it's kind of neat because, if you think about it, Jesus is the Word made flesh. He is the very word of God, come down, become man, and yet he's so humble that he follows the customs of the Jewish people by wearing the fringes on his garment which were meant to remind you to keep the Commandments. I doubt Jesus needed a reminder, an external reminder, to keep the Commandments, and yet he did it out of reverence for and fidelity to the customs of the Jewish people. This is a great example of the fact that Jesus was thoroughly Jewish, that he followed the religion of his people.

In any case, so what Jesus is saying here, back to Matthew 23, is that the scribes and the Pharisees have broad phylacteries — like really big prayer bands — and their fringes are really long. Why? In order to be seen by men. In other words, they do that not because they really want to remember to keep the Commandments of God, they do it so that other people can see how pious they are, how religious they are, how faithful they are. Even though Jesus tells us that inwardly they are not keeping them, secretly they are not following them. And sure enough, he goes on to say that they love the places of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogue. So then as now, people fought over where they sit in Church. And apparently again, the Pharisees, they would get the places of honor in the synagogue; or when there would be a banquet, the Pharisees would get to sit at the head of the table. And not only did people do that as a way of honoring them, but what Jesus is saying is that the Pharisees loved it. They delighted in it. They sought after it. They wanted that kind of praise from men, and that they did their pious exercises precisely in order to be praised by men; not to please God, but to seek the praise of men.

And he says they love being greeted by people in the marketplace and being called rabbi by men. Now what does that mean? Well most of us, if you have read the New Testament, will know that the word rabbi (from John's Gospel), which is still used to this day to address Jewish leaders in the synagogue for example (Jewish ordained ministers are called rabbi), essentially means teacher. That's the basic meaning of it. The literal Hebrew, it's worth pointing out here, actually means "my great one." *Rab* means great in Hebrew. *I* is the personal pronoun for me. So *rabbi* means "my great one." So you can imagine, that might be an exalting title to have, to come up and say my great one. In fact, I have tried this with my students and they just don't want to do it. They don't want to call me my great one, so I will just stick to doctor I guess, or professor. Obviously, that's a very exalted title, to call someone my great one. And that's what rabbi literally meant. So what Jesus is saying here is that they love being called rabbi by others.

So pause there. That's the context of what Jesus is about to say. Everything he has just said up to this point is highlighting two aspects of the scribes and Pharisees. Although they are legitimate teachers of the Jewish people, they are hypocrites and they are also prideful. They want the praise of men. Now Jesus turns though and

gives his disciples a different instruction, and here's where he makes the famous line, where he says, number one, “you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher.” Second, he says you should call “no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.” And then finally, he says don't be “called masters, for you have one master, the Christ.” In other words, the *Christos*, the Messiah. Who is there one master? Jesus is their one master. Okay, what's the point of these three titles? Well, first of all, just the basic meaning. We have already seen that rabbi means my great one or teacher, so Jesus says don't be called rabbi because you all have one teacher. Obviously the implication here is that he's the teacher. We will see the disciples call him teacher elsewhere. Number two, don't be called father. The Greek word here is just the normal word for father, *pater*. We get the word patriarch or patriarchy from that. The rule of fathers is what patriarchy means. Why? Because he said you have one father in heaven, obviously the heavenly Father. And most of Jesus' public ministry is going to be about revealing the fatherhood of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus calls God Father more times in that one sermon than in the entire Old Testament combined. There are only a few references to God as father in the Old Testament, but in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus does it over and over and over again.

And then finally, the third title is, he says you are not to be called master. Now here the Greek word is interesting. It's *kathēgētes*, which comes over into Latin as *magister*. We get the word master from that particular word. We also get the word mister from that word too. It just means someone who is set above us like a master and a servant. Now why does Jesus prescribe these three titles? Well look, here's the key line. This is really the whole point of the teaching. Verse 11, when he says “he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” — and the Greek word here is actually *diakonos*. In other words, whoever's the highest, actually has to be in a sense the deacon, the servant of everyone else. Why? Well the upshot is simple, because whoever exalts himself is going to be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted. And that is really the point of Jesus' statement. The overall message of this particular teaching is about humility, that the disciples are not to seek the praise of others. They are not to seek to be exalted above others. They are to be humble. They are to be servant leaders. I know that is a cliché. People talk a lot these days about servant leadership, but that is a cliché that is actually rooted very clearly in the Gospels. The kind of leaders Jesus wants the

disciples to be are *diakonos*, servants of everyone else. Not people who exalt themselves over everyone else, like the scribes and the Pharisees. He wants them not to be spiritually prideful, but to be spiritually humble. That's the distinction that he is getting at.

Okay, now immediately, if you're a Catholic, the question that emerges here is how do we reconcile our custom of referring to priests as father with Jesus' statement here "call no man your father on earth"? Isn't that an obvious contradiction, an obvious case where we have a Catholic custom that is not only unbiblical, but anti-biblical, right, it contradicts the Scriptures. So why do we do that? How can we reconcile that with the word of God? How can we reconcile that with the teaching of our Lord? I mean this is Jesus' own words here, so this is a pretty big issue and I think we need to face it head on. The first point I would make here is this, if you asked the question in this way, did Jesus absolutely prohibit the use of the word father as an address, we can clearly see that the answer is no, when we put this verse in — not just in its immediate context of teaching spiritual humility — the context of the entire New Testament. This is an important principle of interpretation. As Catholics, we don't believe that you should take one verse out of context and use it as a proof text. We want to interpret every verse of the New Testament in light of the entire New Testament. And so one of the ways to test whether Jesus absolutely prohibited the use of the expression father, is to look at the rest of the New Testament and to see if the apostles absolutely prohibit the use of the word father, or did they use father as a form of address. If they did, then what do we make of Jesus' words?

So this is actually pretty easy to answer, even though it seems like a real difficult thing. I'd make here three points. First, number one, in Matthew's Gospel itself, you should remember, Jesus frequently uses a method of teaching called hyperbole. What is hyperbole? Hyperbole is when you exaggerate in order to make a point. The classic example of this is from the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:28-30, where Jesus says "if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell." Or "if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be throw into hell." So obviously Jesus there is exaggerating in order to make a point. He doesn't actually expect his disciples to cut off their hands or gouge out their

eyes if they are causing them to sin. He is just talking about the radical nature of commitment to the kingdom of God, that we have to root out sin wherever we find it. He is using a memorable image in order to make the point. By the way, if you are a teacher, you know that you have to do this. Because let's face it, students get tired, they get bored, they get distracted; and one of the ways to help them remember what you are teaching is to exaggerate, is to use hyperbole as a technique for teaching. So the first point I would say here is that in Matthew 23 Jesus is using hyperbole, he's exaggerating here. He is not giving an absolute prohibition.

And we can see that if we look at the rest of the New Testament, in which the apostles themselves, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, will use the word *pater*, father, to address other individuals. So a couple of examples here. First, in the book of Acts 7:2, St. Stephen, the first martyr, when he's brought before the Sanhedrin, which consisted of the Jewish priests who were the leaders of his people, addresses them as follows:

Brethren and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia...

He goes on and tells the story of Abraham's journey into the promised land. But notice there, in the opening verse of Stephen's speech, right before he is martyred, he addresses the Jewish elders as fathers as a form of respect, because they were the leaders of the people. And then he also calls Abraham father as a way of respecting him as the ancestor of the Jewish people. Now Stephen, as it goes on to say, dies full of the Holy Spirit of God, and is the first martyr of the Church. Are we to believe here that he's disobeying Christ when he addresses the Jewish elders as fathers? No, that just doesn't seem plausible. What seems more plausible is that Jesus, when he gave that instruction, was using hyperbole in order to teach the disciples about the importance of spiritual humility, and not to absolutely prohibit them from calling anyone father, ever. Which by the way, now that I think about it, all Christians agree on this because all Christians have the custom of a child referring to their father using paternal terms, whether it's as father, or papa, or daddy; all those words mean the same thing. They mean father, and Christians do this all the time. But obviously we are thinking more about religious titles, so let's keep going here. What about St. Paul? Well in 1 Corinthians 4, St. Paul calls

himself father with reference to his Corinthian disciples. So in 1 Corinthians 4:15-16, Paul says this:

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Pause there. Notice that Paul presupposes that although the Corinthians have many guides (like leaders), not everyone is their spiritual father. But he, because he baptized them and gave them the Gospel, he became their spiritual father in Christ Jesus. So again, if Jesus had absolutely prohibited referring to religious leaders as fathers, why does Paul call himself father? It makes more sense to think that Jesus is using hyperbole in the Gospel of Matthew. And then finally, St. John himself, who was one of the Twelve Apostles, who was there when Jesus gave this teaching to the disciples, in his first letter, referred to as 1 John, he addresses the leaders of his congregation as fathers (the same word in Greek, *pater*) So in 1 John 2:13-14, he twice says these words:

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

The Greek word is the same there. Now why would St. John address the men of his community as fathers if Jesus had absolutely prohibited it? The answer is simple. Jesus didn't absolutely prohibit it. He exaggerated, he used hyperbole to teach the disciples about spiritual humility. So in short, when you interpret Matthew 23 in the context of the entire New Testament, it's really clear that this is not an absolute prohibition of the title of father.

Now with that said, I will just make one last point, which I just noticed when I was actually reading it for the for the film just now. I had never noticed this before. If you go back to Matthew 23:8-10, when it comes to the three titles it is interesting, Jesus tells the disciples you are not to be called rabbi, the first title, and then verse 10, neither be called master. In other words, you are not to be called rabbi and you're not to be called master, but he doesn't actually say *they* are not to be called father. He says to them, call no man your father on earth. This is kind of an interesting point. He uses a different expression there for father, referring to them not referring to anyone else as their father. It almost makes you wonder there —

and I am just thinking out loud here — if he, in a sense, anticipates that they are going to be called father by their disciples and followers. But what he's trying to emphasize for them is that they are to call no one father, because the one who is above them is the heavenly Father. That is just an aside. But it is interesting there that he says that. And the point there is of course that all of the spiritual fatherhood of the new covenant derives from the heavenly fatherhood of God. He is the one, true father. In fact, Paul says this in the letter to the Ephesians. He says:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom

Literally in Greek:

all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named.²

And that's really what the fatherhood of a priest is in our day and time. He is a spiritual father who images the heavenly fatherhood of God, which comes to us through Christ, who is the image of the heavenly Father. It's a spiritual paternity that is very, very important, and which we honor and recognize through the address father, just as the Apostles did in the rest of the New Testament. Okay, that was kind of a long aside, but I hope it clears up that passage for you because I do think that in my experience a lot of Catholics are unnecessarily scandalized by Matthew 23 and they kind of wonder, are we being unbiblical in our customs?

Now with that in mind, we are not going to let the priests off the hook, because the first reading for this week is actually interestingly selected. It's a prophecy from the book of Malachi about corrupt priests, and it's a pretty hard-hitting text. So let's go back and look at it there. Malachi 1:14-2:10. So let me just read this to you:

I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name is feared among the nations. "And now, O priests, this command is for you.

So notice he is addressing the priests of the old covenant.

² Ephesians 3:14

If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart.

Now pause there. It is really interesting. In the lectionary it skips over the next few verses in Malachi, and there's good reason, but I am going to read them for you anyway. It is because this is what God goes on to say:

Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung upon your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence.

Pause there. I'm laughing here like a teenager, but it is kind of funny because God, he is so displeased with the priests because of their corruption, that he's going to take the dung of the animal sacrifices and spread it on their faces. In other words, that is how displeasing their sacrifices are to him. Because one of the realities of Temple life is that when you are offering animal sacrifice, there would be dung in the Temple from the cows, the bulls, goats, and that kind of thing. So God here threatens to spread the dung of their sacrifices in the faces of the priests, and to put them out of his presence. And it continues:

So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may hold, says the LORD of hosts. My covenant with him was a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him, that he might fear; and he feared me, he stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction [literally *torah*, the law] from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

Pause there. What is he saying there? He is saying that the priest is supposed to be the one who has the Torah in his mouth, the law of God in his mouth, so that the people seek it from his lips. And yet these old covenant priests have become corrupt. They are not following the teachings of God. They have turned aside from the law. And so what does God say, verse 8, here is where the lectionary picks up again:

But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction." Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?

Okay, so pause there. What's the point of this reading for the first reading of this Sunday. Well obviously this is an Old Testament prophecy, a very, very shocking, striking Old Testament prophecy against the corrupt priesthood of Levi. So if you will remember, in the Old Testament the priesthood was restricted to the tribe of Levi. All the other 11 tribes lost their priesthood. And so these priests at the time of Malachi, which is hundreds of years before Jesus, all have become corrupt in the Temple. They are not following the law themselves, and they are scandalizing the people through their moral corruption. And what the prophet is doing is calling them to return to the way the Lord. And interestingly, the image he gives here is of the fatherhood of God. "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?" So the priests, already in the Old Testament, are supposed to be a kind of living image of God the Father, the God who made the universe. Instead, these priests are wicked and have become a stumbling block, a scandal to the people of Israel. Why? Ultimately because they're proud, because they have given into spiritual pride.

And that's in fact the theme of the Responsorial Psalm for today. So if you look at the Responsorial Psalm, it is Psalm 131, the opening line there sums it all up:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;

What does that mean, my heart is not lifted up? It means lifted up in pride. "My eyes are not raised too high." Have you ever known someone who is like highbrow? It is kind of a metaphor for someone who's prideful. Well the psalmist is seeking to be humble, and that forms the bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament text for today. Because ultimately what is Jesus's message? His message is not that you should never call anyone father on earth ever, ever, ever, whether your dad or if it's a religious leader like a priest. His message is

whoever exalts himself, like the Pharisees and the scribes did, is going to be humbled, is going to be brought low; but whoever humbles himself is going to be lifted up. He's going to be exalted.

And in closing then, just as a brief note from the living tradition. St. John Chrysostom in the fourth century wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, and already by the fourth century, the custom of referring to priests as father had spread. In fact, the custom had spread so that bishops are often referred to as Abba, the very Aramaic word that Jesus uses to pray to God as Father in the garden of Gethsemane. And St. John Chrysostom deals with this issue when he's writing on the Gospel of Matthew. He says this:

“Call no man your father.” This is said in order that they may know whom they ought to call Father in the highest sense. It is not said frivolously as if no one should ever be called father. Just as the human master is not the divine Master, so neither is the father the Father who is the cause of all, both of all masters and all fathers.³

So notice there what John is saying there, that Jesus' point is the supremacy of God as Father. It is not an absolute prohibition from calling anyone father, or for that matter, calling anyone teacher, which is of course exactly what we do when we call someone doctor (like Dr. Pitre). It just comes from the Latin word meaning a teacher, someone who teaches others. So we can see in our own customs of language that we do call people mister, we do call people doctor, we do call people father. What Jesus wants us to do is ultimately refer all fatherhood on heaven and on earth to the one fatherhood of God, the heavenly Father of the heavenly Kingdom.

³ John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 72.3; trans. in M. Simonetti, p. 167