

## Homily 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time

Ever since I completed my church law studies twenty years ago I find myself being asked the question: “What does the law say about x or y?” from people in need of canonical advice. It is right and just to ask such a question, but there is more to consider here. The last canon of the 1983 Latin Code, canon 1752, concludes with these words: “the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one’s eyes.”

Today I want to ask a question: What do each of us keep before our eyes? Because people need reminders about what is necessary, about what needs to be kept before our eyes. This brings us to today’s readings, particularly the gospel. You may wonder why Matthew chose to record the times when Jesus confronted the Pharisees, the Pharisees who were known for their strict observance, and the Scribes, who were the lawmakers and the elite of all the people.

Jesus does this because these men had a great history. On them the law and the prophets were carried out very carefully. The law and the prophets were argued over until people could understand how important it was for you to have the law and the prophets.

But Jesus speaks to them and he speaks harshly because, as he says, “You do all the right things. You follow the law.”

And even in our own society — and this is the reason why Matthew writes these things, is because he wants you to know, and you might get a little uncomfortable, but — we too tend towards being Pharisees, judging others, and we also tend to be Scribes, interpreting what God says to others, and sometimes we commit the very same fault that the original Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ time committed.

And what is that fault? No love. Only words, only rules, only regulations. And everybody must keep to the rules and keep to the regulations.

The great danger becomes that the rules and the regulations become the reality of our religion and not guidelines, guidelines that help us to understand that our religion is not no heart, no feeling, no love, no compassion, just words on a page.

But the heart of God is not in rules and not in regulations.

Well, what is it in then? Well, I'm going to read something from a Jesuit priest, Donal Neary, that kind of sums it up:

“Compassion: compassion is or is not at the centre of our belief. If we are people of compassion, we are close to God. The less compassion we have, the further we stray from each other and from God Himself.

“Compassion means *compassio*: to suffer with, to be one with the people that we walk among. Not higher than them, not lower than them, but one with them.

“And why?

“Because this is what God does. God has compassion on us first, and He wants us to share His compassion and our compassion with each other.”

So if you want to define a Christian, you do not define them as they keeps the Ten Commandments and all the other things that we do — and we should do and we have to do because this is the framework on which compassion is based — but we always must come back to the fact that God loves and God's love is called compassion.

Donal Neary writes, “The Christian heart is recognised by compassion, by a fellow feeling for people, by being drawn to others as God reaches out to us.

“It is not just helping for the sake of helping, but helping because – and this is the only reason why we reach out to others – because we are children of God, brothers and sisters, one with God, and to be with God is to reach out.

I believe that we need to extend this thought further. One of the criticisms of the Pharisees and Scribes is that they fail to lift burdens. Recalling that the First Council of the Church taught the “no greater burden than what is essential” should be imposed, I firmly believe that lifting burdens is a profound way we can understand the church's mission.

Two stories. When I was getting ready to go away to study I received a call from the Vicar General. He asked me if I was ready to go away, if I needed anything. His final comment was: “If you come back and start quoting chapters and verse of canon law I am going to kick your....”

Secondly, a few weeks ago I was asked a question by someone in one of the churches where I usually serve. As you may be aware, this year Christmas falls on Monday. This means the time to decorate for Christmas after the Fourth Sunday of Advent is limited to Christ Eve afternoon. The question I was asked was: "Is it okay to decorate for Christmas before the Fourth Sunday of Advent?" While the norm would be to do this circumstances this year demand a change in practice. A simple thing but a way not to impose an unnecessary burden.

Today we are all asked by the Scriptures if we practice what we preach, if we lift the burdens of others as Christ has done for all. This is a time for us to examine our lives to and accept the challenge to be more faithful disciples of the Lord at home, at work and in our everyday encounters with others. This is the time for us to lift burdens whenever the opportunity presents itself.

This can seem like a difficult and weighty thing to do. But if we ask God to lead us, He will help us realize there are many ways to help people who are carrying heavy loads in life and that helping bear their burdens does not have to become burdensome to us.

Do we keep compassion and lifting burdens before our eyes?

Prayer: Lord, help me understand the importance of making myself available to help people with their difficulties in life, even if it means a sacrifice for me personally. Amen.