31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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

Psalm 131

1 Thessalonians 2:7-9,13

Matthew 23: 1-12

I guess it’s time for some soul searching. The first reading lays into the priests of the people. The gospel jumps on the leaders of the faith. What am I going to do? I feel that I should run and hide; turn in my collar and be a greeter at Walmart.

The prophet Malachi. Priests of the people can so easily pump themselves up. It is so easy to lord it over the people. “I am the authority. I am the righteous one. I have the say, on what goes on or what does not. I am the decision maker. I am the boss.” Now according to the prophet, I am the fool. I am not the boss. If not, who is? God. The role of the priest is to show people the way – the way to the presence of God. If a priest cannot do that, he is not a priest at all. He is accursed. He is contemptible and base before all the people. He is not the father of the people to lord it over them. The priest must lead the people to our Father in Heaven who is the Lord of hosts.

If I as priest, whom you call “father”, have led you to believe that I am the Lord your God, consider me cursed. The Lord our God is our Father. To Him be all honor and praise.

In Matthew’s time, the Christian communities he came in contact with showed signs of being contemptible. So he writes in his gospel about the scribes and the Pharisees. He shakes his head at them. Avoid titles, he says, because they can disfigure what the Christian community is all about. The title ‘Rabbi’ literally means ‘The Great One’. No one is great but our God. Avoid the title ‘Master’ which is akin to our notion of ‘guru’. There is only one way, the one way of Jesus. Avoid the title “father” which was used of founders of particular groups, even churches. There is but one founder of our community and that is the one Father in heaven.1

We are to be one community of believers, brothers and sisters in Christ. Our society, however, devolves into strata - the higher-ups and the rest of us. We have presidents and senators and congressmen and congress-women. We have people on the red carpet and the rest of us who gawk. We have popes and cardinals and bishops and priests and deacons. It’s in our DNA. We have generals and majors and captains and corporals and sergeants and then the grunts. I guess it is to maintain order and perspective. It all depends on attitude with all these divisions we dream up. If we are to be a Christian community, with all these divisions of rank, our attitude must be Christ’s.

St. Paul in our second reading spells out whom a Christian leader must be about. If one must lead, he or she must be gentle as a nursing mother cares for her children. Full of affection for others to the point of sharing our very selves with each other as well as the Gospel. We address each other as dearly beloved, working so as not to be a burden to anyone. And giving thanks to God unceasingly.

We are to pray Psalm 131:

O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty;

I busy not myself with great things, nor with things too sublime for me.

Nay rather, I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child.

Like a weaned child on its mother’s lap, so is my soul within me.

O Israel, (O People of God), hope in the Lord, both now and forever.

Amen.