

21st Wednesday of Ordinary Time. 8/25/2021

You hypocrites

Today we hear harsh words from Jesus. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites.” He says that twice in our Gospel reading. These are the last two of a series of woes in chapter 23 of St Matthew’s Gospel. Six times we hear in that chapter: “Woe to you, you hypocrites.”

This list of woes is parallel to the list of Beatitudes that we hear in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes we hear about attitudes of a faithful disciple who puts all his or her trust in God and will receive abundant blessing. In the woes we hear about how the practice of religion can go astray.

One word that is key in the list of woes is hypocrite. In the original Greek, hypocrite was used to refer to an on-stage actor, somebody who takes on a character and performs for an audience. When this happens in our religious life, our motivation shifts from seeking God and his kingdom to seeking approval and recognition from people. Our religious practice becomes an instrument for something else: An instrument to belong to a social or political group, an instrument to be in a position of power, an instrument to become liked or respected by others. It is no longer about loving God with all my heart, getting closer to him every day, and following him wherever he leads me.

The list of woes reflected the opposition to Jesus by the religious authorities, and it also reflected the hostility felt by the Church community of the Gospel writer. It is also a

warning to the Church down the centuries, a warning to us, never to lose sight of the core of our religious practice as relationship and communion with God. To get closer and closer to God every day, through service to our brothers and sisters, through all the symbols of the liturgy, through his presence in the sacraments, and especially in Holy Communion.

Today, let us ask for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who put all her trust in God, for purity of intention, for the grace to keep our eyes on Christ, and to be drawn to him more every day.

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary. Prentice Hall 1990.

The Navarre Bible. Scepter Publishers 2013.