49A Homily for the Thirty-First Sunday of the Ordinary Time Year A

*Homily By Deacon Nick McFarlane*

Readings: Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10; Psalm 130(131); Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13; Matthew 23:1-12.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our Gospel today, Jesus warns all His listeners – the people and His Disciples – against the sin of pride. He points to the pridefulness of the scribes and the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of His day, who like to show off their fastidious religiosity but impose impossible burdens on their followers. They are in stark contrast with Jesus who says: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”(Matt 11:28-30). This is the great truth which is “hidden … from the wise and learned and revealed … to babes”(Matt 11:25). You see, our progress toward the joy and peace that only Jesus can give us, is conditional on us realizing that it cannot come primarily from our own efforts – it can only come from our dependence on Jesus and His saving grace.

The reason that Jesus was so hard on the Pharisees and so soft on sinners like prostitutes and tax collectors, was that the sinners knew that they needed a lot of help but the Pharisees thought that they could get to heaven in their own strength. There is more than a little of the Pharisee in all of us. We want God to congratulate us on all that we are doing for Him. We would be better to come before Him humbly like the tax collector in the temple and just ask “God be merciful to me a sinner”(Luke 18:13).

What Jesus is warning us about is the sin of pride, a vice that destroys all virtues and a cancer which grows unseen in the soul; not only in the hearts of the tepid and the weak but especially in those who have worked hard at the performance of their religion. In contrast to the brittle vanity of pride, is the strength which comes from true humility.

Humility in essence is deep dependence on God – our realisation the whatever gifts we have and whatever good we do all come from God’s graciousness to us. God’s love sustains us in every breath we take. Without God’s love we are nothing. This sort of humility does not deny our gifts or our strengths, but knows where they come from. Two recent giants of the spiritual life bear out this truth. First let us look at St Thérèse of Lisieux. She really wanted to be a saint but she knew she did not have the strength to lift herself up to heaven. She came to realize that before God she was always just a small child. The key to her ‘little way’ to God was to hold on to her smallness and trust God to lift her up.

Today’s psalm exactly reflects St Thérèse’s attitude:

“O Lord, my heart is not proud nor haughty my eyes.

I have not gone after things too great nor marvels beyond me.

Truly I have set my soul in silence and peace.

A weaned child on its mother’s breast, even so is my soul.”

On her one journey away from her home, her pilgrimage to Rome in 1887, St Thérèse saw an elevator, a lift. She was very impressed. She wrote:

“I too would like to find an elevator to lift me up to Jesus, for I am too little to climb up the steep stairway of perfection.” She found that elevator through contemplating Isaiah’s image of God’s love for His people:

“As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you and you shall suck,

you shall be carried upon her hip, and dandled upon her knees” (Isaiah 66:13,12).

St Thérèse wrote that never had words more tender and more melodious come to give joy to her soul. “The elevator which must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I have no need to grow up, but rather I have to remain little and become this more and more” (*The Story of a Soul*, Manuscript “C” p 208).

Another great modern saint, St John Paul II, although as different from St Thérèse as you could imagine, also seems to have found his path to holiness through an elevator. In his early twenties, he read and contemplated St Louis de Montfort’s book *True Devotion to Mary*. He came to understand that the simplest and best way to Jesus was through Mary. Instead of abandoning his childhood devotion to Mary in order to get closer to Christ, he would depend on her maternal intercession. He later wrote “If Jesus, the one Mediator, is the Way of our prayer, then Mary, his purest and most transparent reflection, shows us the Way.” Mary, Jesus’ Holy Mother is the one creature most conformed to Jesus Christ her Son. And so the more one is devoted to Mary, our spiritual mother, the more one will be consecrated to Jesus Christ. (Rosarium Virginis Mariae #15-16)

And so, as a young man, St John Paul II totally consecrated himself to Jesus through Mary. This is the meaning of his motto as pope – *Totus Tuus* – ‘totally yours’ from the words of this consecration of total abandonment to Mary "I belong entirely to you, and all that I have is yours. I take you for my all. O Mary, give me your heart".

It is clear that the tremendous spiritual power given to both St Thérèse and St John Paul comes from their humility. Although very different people, living in very different circumstances both were given amazing spiritual gifts for the good of the whole Church and of the world. In both cases they were drawn close to God through the realisation of their own smallness and their great need of spiritual help. Because of this realisation they had the humility to ask for help and they were given it.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is exactly the same for us. We cannot live a good life unless we bring ourselves humbly before God and ask for His help. In this Mass, Jesus is here with us. If we ask Him He will lift us up to His Father. Our Lady is close to all who call on her. She intercedes for you and for me because we are her spiritual children. In this, she does just what she was asked to do by her dying son, Jesus, when He gave her to us be our spiritual mother.

Let us pray with the psalmist:

“Truly I have set my soul in silence and peace.

A weaned child on its mother’s breast, even so is my soul.”