

November 4, 2017 – 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

A clergyman had reached the end of his rope, and he decided that he was swimming against the tide trying to get any response from his congregation. He decided to try some other way of life that might give him a greater personal satisfaction. He was very disappointed to discover that a job was hard to come by. In fact, he got to the point that he was prepared to take any job at all that came his way. At last, he landed a job in the local zoo. Unfortunately, when he went there, the job was not exactly available just yet, but the manager asked him to consider taking a temporary job, until the other one was vacant. As it happened the chimpanzee had died, and had not yet been replaced. The chimp was a great favorite with the children, and the cage could not be left empty for long. They had a chimp suit, and the man was asked if he would mind getting into the suit, and taking the place of the chimp. All he'd have to do was to roll around a few times, eat a banana, go back in the back for a rest, etc. He decided to give it a go. He was an instant success. The children gathered around the cage. Every movement he made was greeted with cheers. He soon discovered that he was now getting much more attention than he ever got in the pulpit. One day, he decided to really get into the act. He jumped up, grabbed an overhead bar, and began to swing to and fro, to the delighted screams of the children. The cameras were flashing, and the crowd was gathering, so he got carried away with himself, and he really began to swing with full gusto. Unfortunately, after one huge effort, his hands (paws?) slipped, and he went flying over the partition into the cage next door. A huge tiger approached, and forgetting that he was supposed to be a chimp, he screamed, "Help! Help!" to which the tiger whispered sharply, "Shut up, you fool; I'm a minister, too!"

The gospel today, and also the first reading is very difficult for a lot of priests to hear, because they are talking about priests. But, they're also talking about laity, especially Jesus in the gospel. In our first reading, from the prophet Malachi, Malachi means messenger, we don't know his real name. All we know, is that Malachi is the last prophet you meet in the old testament. He is upset and God has told him to speak because the priestly class, the Levites, the ones that Aaron was the high priest of, for a while, Moses's brother, are laying heavy burdens on people. And, they are not helping them carry it. They are making it difficult for them to live. They're making it so that the people don't want to be children of God. They don't want to be the chosen people. So, God tells them, "your blessing will become a curse." What does that mean? It means, as you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind. That means, God is going to take your blessing and turn it back as a curse on you, as a priest. He is making sure, He says, "take care of the people." Cardinal George, when he was Archbishop Cardinal of Chicago, would meet with the seminarians. This was before Francis or Benedict was Pope. He would say, "I'm glad you guys are John Paul II priests. I'm glad that you are pro-life, that you are all these things that John Paul II stood for. But, he said, "I don't want you to drop this in people's laps and walk away. All these hard teachings. I want you to remember to walk with them, with love." Cardinal George was telling the seminarians, be good priests, but be loving priests, care about your flock. We all know priests, that really, we wonder why they were priests. And, we go and pray for them. I was in the pews for 38 years before I was ordained. I remember all those things, the priests that could care less. They just thought it was the 9 to 5 thing and don't bother me, and, I'm just going to take a nap all the time, and would never return phone calls, etc. etc. This warning is still in effect for priests. So, we have to pray for our priests. We have to pray for our bishops, and our Pope. It's a very difficult position to be in today, especially with priests, because of what's gone on for the last several years. My entire priesthood and my seminary training, has been overshadowed by the scandal. What a terrible thing. 1.5 percent of

Catholic priests, for a period of forty to fifty years, doing that to people who cannot protect themselves, innocent little children, innocent teenagers. It throws a big shadow over everything the rest of us try and do. People look at priests and say, "you all are pedophiles." But wait a minute. You go to a doctor and he makes a mistake, are all doctors incompetent? No, but, people have that general idea. Yet the percentages for child molestation are greater in everything else. But, it shows the standard that we are held to. It's a very high standard, it's very difficult to be constantly in the spotlight. So, we need to pray for priests.

Jesus gives us the gospel today that is interesting, because, it is always being thrown back in our faces as Catholics. "Don't call anyone father, you can't call that man father." Really. I've told any number of people, "then what do you call the man that impregnated your mother, and had you?" They go very quietly, because they don't quote the rest of it. What is Jesus talking about in the gospel? Jesus is talking about, what to do when faced with religious leaders, that talk the talk but don't walk the walk. Jesus is saying listen to them, because what they are saying is true, most likely. Don't follow their example, but listen to what they're telling you. You are going to be right if you listen to what they tell you. But, don't walk their walk. Many of them are hypocrites. He says, "they have the authority vested in them." For his priests, the chair of Moses, for us priests, Jesus Christ. They can preach the truth. There was a priest in the seminary, and when he got up to preach at Mass, he was conservative, he was very solid in Catholic doctrine. But, what he taught in his class in the seminary, he wanted the Catholic Church to become Lutheran. He didn't want the Catholic Church to be Catholic anymore. He didn't walk the walk, but he talked the talk. So, that people listened to him, that's fine. That happens. But Jesus is saying, "be careful, because they're going to put the heavy burden on the people." He tells us one of the things that's going on, and I'll convert that into modern-day things. They widen their phylacteries. A phylactery was a little leather case that had a little scripture writing on it, they put it on their head and they wrapped a ribbon around their head to keep it in place. Some of them would make their phylacteries so big, they would have to have somebody walk them around because it would cover their eyes. A way of saying, "look how holy I am, I'm carrying scripture right on my forehead." They would lengthen their tassels. You knew that they were the priestly class because they wore a stole with tassels. People would say, "oh look, there goes a priest, he's got tassels." So, they would lengthen them, so, "oh, he must be holy because they gave him long tassels." They wanted places of honor wherever they went. "I'm a priest so I get to sit up front in the first place to eat." Places of honor in church. At this time where was a place of honor, up front, they were already up front, I don't know what the power was in that. They wanted people to yell out across the market square, the mall, "hey rabbi." So that everybody knew who they were. They wanted to be called master. "Oh, master, you are so wise, Jesus was saying, "don't follow their example, don't be all puffed up with arrogance and egotism." How does that translate into today's world? People tell me, "The pastor in one of the local parishes, he is so holy, he wears a cassock every day." I'm thinking, I would be dead of heat exhaustion. But, that's not why he's holy, it's just an external garment. A friend of mine was back east on the east coast. I don't know how many of you remember the berretta, the hat. This truck driver who hadn't been to church in forever, saw my friend in his cassock and berretta. He slammed on the break of his delivery truck, turned the motor off, he got out, he dropped to his knees before my friend. With tears going down the sides of his face he said, "the hat father, the hat." What about the guy under it?

I know a priest in this diocese, he's changed a little bit, but I don't know how much, and I'm going to go back a way because I'm going to talk about VCR's. He needed his fixed. There was a guy in south Tucson

who fixed those. So, he took the VCR to this guy, and the guy said, "okay, buddy, I'll have it fixed for you in about a week." "Buddy!!! How dare you call me buddy!" He went on this long tirade about being a Catholic priest, and "you will call me father!" Oh man. It turns out a parishioner from a neighboring parish saw that happen. They came back and told me and I was just, oh my gosh, that's horrible. They are still there. Does he preach a good homily? Yes he does. Does he tell you how to live a good Christian life? Yes, yes he does. But, like Jesus said, "if he's not walking the walk, don't follow him." What Jesus is talking about is humility. It's for both priests and laity, everybody who professes to be a Christian.

Before Jesus Christ, humility was not a virtue. It was reviled, it was hated as something low. To cultivate humility, was to say, "I want to be a slave." The Pharisees, if they didn't embrace humility, you know what happened? They had to make themselves honorable. So, we have these scribes and Pharisees, doing all this because they wanted to be important. Their egos had to be massaged. Because the culture said, "glorify yourself." Not, glorify God, but glorify yourself. The religion said glorify God, but they were living in the culture and decided to go that way first. Then, Jesus came along and He tells us in the gospel and other places, "the last shall be first and the first shall be last." "the humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled." Be humble. Why? Because it's a virtue. It blesses the person with humility with distinct advantages. If we didn't have humility, we would remain tapped in our weaknesses and shortcomings. In, *An Imitation of Christ*, the movie, it said, "if you seek yourself, you will find yourself to your own ruin." We don't seek ourselves, we seek God. We seek union with God. Humility liberates us from the blackmail of the devil. The devil has nothing on us if we practice humility, because he can't stand it. It drives him away. Society today says, "oh no, don't be humble, tell everybody on Facebook, Instagram, whatever, tell everybody what you're doing, even if it's bad. Glorify yourself." I quit using Facebook eight years ago because all my nieces were doing was whining about how tired they were. I'm thinking, well, you've got a full-time job, going to school full time, and you've got four kids. That means tired. You don't have to tell anybody that. It means tired. Humility has something going for it, in that it is habit forming. The more we serve others, the more we want to serve others. The more we enjoy serving others. All of our saints were an example of humility. Saint Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower, said, "I keep before me in my mind, the image of myself as weak and imperfect, and in this I find joy." Why? Because then God can do great things through her. God can help her. If we're not humble, God can't help us. When Jesus says "do not call anyone father, do not call anyone rabbi, do not call anyone master." He's not saying don't call people that. He is saying don't seek it out as a thing of honor, as a thing of egotism. We call people rabbi today, we call people father today, we call people teachers today, is that breaking Jesus' law? No. Jesus was making sure they understood using exaggeration. This is what you're not supposed to seek, you're supposed to seek humility. They say whoever humbles himself will be exalted. That, is the Christian thing. We are not here to be exalted in this earth, we are here to be humbled in this earth. And, thereby have the crown of exaltation in the next life. We are all about the next life. The moment we forget that, we fall into the bad thing again. Saint John Vianney. One time the cardinal archbishop of Paris heard about the great work he was doing by hearing confessions for up to 18 hours a day. They had to build a separate rail line for the train to come to his little village, for people to have their confessions heard. He called him in, and he gave him this great big medal and award and Saint John was very humbled. He sat there like this, like he'd been beaten, as he put it over his head. Nobody knows what happened to that medal, they know he sold it and gave the money to the poor but we don't know when. When people asked him about it he said, "I don't want to go to heaven and have Saint Peter say oh no, you can't come in here, you got your reward down on earth. He said, I want my reward in heaven not here on earth. Because of humility, when the devil attacked him, he laughed the

devil in the face. Could we do that today? Could we laugh the devil in the face? He gave him a little nick name, "Old Scratch." "Woke me up again last night, Old Scratch set my bed on fire last night, it's a good thing I only need two hours of sleep each night." But that was because of humility. The power we have over evil, the power we have over temptation, power we have over the world and ourselves, all comes from humility when we have it. If we don't have humility, then we really truly don't have power. To be humble is not to be walked on. To be humble is to recognize, I need God, and I want God to do great things through me.

God Bless You.