

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Feb 26th 2013

The “scribes and the Pharisees” are the group in the gospels that everybody loves to hate. By that I mean that we identify them as a group of people who often seem to be at odds with Jesus—and we seem to know why. The word most often associated with them is “hypocrite.” That is, we listen to a gospel passage such as today’s in which the scribes and Pharisees are depicted as being “fond of places of honor at banquets and the front seats in synagogues.” We hear them described as those who “bind up heavy loads . . . while they themselves will not lift a finger to budge them.” “Hypocrites!” we say. Saying one thing while doing another.

In our zeal to identify this group’s disease, we often miss the fact that they are not really “bad” people. Jesus actually approves of their teachings. The indictment which Jesus makes is this: “Their words are bold but their deeds are few.” I believe their affliction is not so much hypocrisy as superficiality. They have a lot of the right words; it’s just that the words never penetrate deeply enough to affect their actions.

Recently, I heard the “religious landscape” of the United States described as “about 3,000 miles wide and about 3 inches deep.” We have every imaginable variety of religious experience from coast to coast. We don’t lack variety, but depth. We are easily distracted and on to the next new idea that attracts us, even jumping from one religious expression to another. This “disease” tends to afflict us all.

Lent is an opportunity to let the Lord take us into deep water. To let the Word penetrate deeply into our hearts so that it truly changes them. To let the Word, not just inform, but transform us, so that our actions are affected. Today’s Lenten prayer might be: “Lord, make me a person of depth in you.”

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