



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

They do not practise what they preach

Readings: Malachi 1:14-2.2, 8-10, Ps 131, 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 9-13, Matthew 23: 1-12

When you cannot put a cigarette paper between what you say and what you do and what you are, then you have achieved integrity.

Most of us are not yet in that league, much though we may aspire to be.

We are often closer to the Pharisees than we would like to admit. That is certainly true of my experience. And, as a preacher, I needs be aware of this uncomfortable fact.

A preacher needs, for his credibility, to exhibit the qualities and standards to which, by his preaching, he exhorts his flock. Otherwise he is just heaping impossible burdens on his hearers while, himself, 'sitting light' to the demands of the Gospel. This is the essence of hypocrisy.

The origin of the word 'hypocrite' lies in the Greek language. A hypocrite, no judgement intended, was an actor who put on a mask in order to misrepresent reality. Our use of the word emphasises the deceitfulness and falsity of the man who spends his life acting the part.

Of course, up to a point, we are all hypocrites. We have the highest standards and regularly fall short of them. The difference between us and

the ordinary run of the mill hypocrite is that we acknowledge that shocking and distressing gap in integrity every time we come to Mass and everytime we make our confession.

For the preacher this dissonance is particularly acute because he is speaking with authority while personally evading the duty and the consequence of his words. Thus the preparation for preaching needs to be rigorous and self-searching. It is the easiest thing in the world for the preacher either to waffle his way lazily through a collection of anodyne truisms – ‘God loves you etc’, or to employ the Word of God as a vehicle for riding his personal hobby horses down the Nave. Neither option is genuine preaching and neither option is acceptable.

It helps, therefore, to remind ourselves of the aim and purpose of preaching and how we go about preparing for that sacred and privileged task.

If a preacher is to avoid the elephant traps of his vanity set out above, he must, first of all, be a serious and regular penitent. He must know his need of God’s mercy and seek the places of humiliation that will correct his otherwise largely egocentric perspectives.

He must engage with the Word of God, listening and responding day by day. One of the problems of modern theological education was, by the prevalence of the ‘critical method’ of study, an attitude to Holy Scripture which sought to interrogate and amend the text and/or its meaning. Much post-war study treated the text as it were a sixth form essay in need of some serious literary criticism from the tutor.

The nearest picture I can think of is in the O level biology class where we would pin out a dead frog on a dissecting board and piecemeal take it to bits, while trying to see how it manoeuvred when fully animated. The Holy Scripture is no Frog. It is the living and acting Word of God which is the very

source of our being. If there is any examination to do then it is the other way round. We are the dead frog and Holy Scripture interrogates us. Holy Scripture examines us forensically and prescribes for our Healing, our penance and our 'ghostly counsel.'

Once we have got this firmly in our thick heads, we can move on.

The process of preparing a sermon may take many different formats but, if it is to be of God, then the essentials remain a constant.

First of all the preacher will dwell with the Word for several days. He will marinate in it. It will be his constant companion in the coming days and the subject of his daily prayer waiting upon God. He may, like me, almost always have a brilliant idea of what God wants to impart to His people. He may also be like me in discovering that, by the end of the week's 'marinading' in the text in prayer, his brilliant idea has been utterly superseded, overtaken and demolished by God's much better idea!

For some preachers they will rehearse the sermon in their minds and sally forth ad lib into the preachment. For others of us, more cautious souls and with degraded memory, the upshot of this process of praying the Scripture in the company of the Holy Ghost, will be to commit it to the written word and preach from the consequent text. This may seem to lack the spontaneity of the freeform preacher but it has several compensatory aspects. One is that the text is tight and precise. When asked to clarify it is there in black and white. It avoids potential error and is accountable. It is also then permanently available. It also means that, God willing, the danger of repetition and windy longevity is usually avoided. This is particularly significant in a culture of severely limited non-visual attention. Neither way is definitively correct. Both require substantial preparation and attention. One other thing that they have in common is that the preacher's words,

before they are uttered to a single other soul, are spoken to him. He stands judged by what the Lord has imparted to him through His Word and therefore he does not lightly impose this on his hearers without being aware of the cost of conformity of the soul to the sermon.

The purpose of a sermon (the word means simply 'a word about the Word') is to help the listener to hear the Word of God in all its glory. To understand it better. To see its practical application for his life. To be warned of any present danger. To be encouraged on the pilgrim way. To be prepared and uplifted for the great encounter that awaits at the Communion rail where all words fade into insignificance besides the reality of the Presence of the Word - Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, Ascended and Glorified.