

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

There is a story about a Jewish man who survived the concentration camps. The night after his liberation, he went to stay in a nearby house. There he found about thirty other survivors gathered in to one room. Seeing a mirror on the wall, he went over to it. He was anxious to see what he looked like. But in the same mirror he saw the reflections of some of the other people as well. There were many faces in the mirror. And he couldn't tell which face belonged to him. He had to make faces and gestures, in order to be able to distinguish himself from the group.

And when he did distinguish his own face, he got a terrible shock. Because the person he saw in the mirror he had never seen before. He was so changed that the person in the mirror bore no resemblance to the person he had seen before the war. A strange story, but a true one.

Jesus' harshest words were directed, not at sinners, but at religious people such as the Scribes and Pharisees. Right from the beginning of his ministry the Pharisees, in particular, had dogged him. He had been very patient with them. He had reasoned with them, but to no avail. Eventually he was forced to expose them.

And how did he do that ? In a manner of speaking, he did it by holding up a mirror in front of them so that for the first time in their lives they might be able to see their true image. It was an image that few of them would have recognised as their own. If they did, they would have got a terrible shock

The picture Jesus painted of them was not a pretty one. In fact we are filled with disgust when we contemplate their religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies of their lives.

What were the main faults Jesus found with them ? They didn't practice what they preached. They made things impossible for ordinary people by multiplying rules and demanding exact observance of these rules, without offering the slightest help to those who found them burdensome. They sought their own glory, rather than the glory of God. They were full of themselves, and were interested only in themselves. And the most damning thing of all – they lacked charity and compassion in their dealings with others.

Jesus shattered their complacent belief in their own goodness and virtue. He showed them up for what they really were – men bursting with vanity, and full of pride. Everything they did had one aim – to build up the castle of their own supposed goodness and excellence.

Yet the Scribes and Pharisees were not a uniquely evil group of people. They were just human. They could be any group of people at any time and anywhere. The picture Jesus painted of them is a mirror into which we too are invited to look. If we do look into it, we will see our own face there, for we have some if not all of their faults.

Do we not sometimes consider ourselves better than others? Do we not lay down the law for others? Do we not demand sacrifices of others which we do not demand of ourselves? Do we not like to be noticed, to be admired, and to take the best seat – if we can get it? A uniform or special dress can be a great help in this regard. Are we, too, not lacking in charity, compassion, a sense of justice and a spirit of service?

The real tragedy of the Scribes and Pharisees wasn't the fact that they had faults, but that they were blind to their faults. Yet many of them were undoubtedly sincere and pious people. But what good is piety if it doesn't make us more humble, more loving and more compassionate? Piety is no substitute for goodness.

We don't have to put on an outward show, or pretend to be what we are not. All we have to do is try to be true to what we are – sons and daughters of God.