

## Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time: The Courage to Be who we are, Catholic

They really dressed up. They were something to behold. Imagine if you were a common everyday man or woman back in the time of the Lord. You lived in the hill country seventy or eighty miles from Jerusalem. A trip to Jerusalem was a journey of well over a week. You had been there once, but you were a baby then. Now, after saving up and putting your home in order, you decided to make the pilgrimage. You were overwhelmed by the sheer size of the city. You had never seen so many people in one place. And then you saw the Temple, the magnificent Temple that had just been completed. It overwhelmed you with its beauty. People would call it one of the wonders of the ancient world. Well, you expected to be shocked by the city and the Temple. What you didn't expect were the strange people in strange garb you came upon. There were the Roman soldiers, seemingly everywhere you looked, except in the Temple. There were people from foreign lands, mostly merchants, wearing the dress of their countries. But you expected to come upon foreigners in foreign dress. What you didn't expect were the people from your own land who dressed so differently. The Temple priests and their helpers, the Levites, all had distinctive clothes. But the ones whose dress really shocked you were the Pharisees. They wore clothes with huge tassels to proclaim their importance. They had headbands holding their phylacteries. These were ribbons of cloth on which were written some of the words of scripture. They made these wider and wider so they could hold more scripture. The reason they had these was so that they would see the Word of God every time they turned their head, therefore following the command of Proverbs 4:21: "Keep my words always before your eyes."

According to Jesus in today's Gospel, these Pharisees strutted their stuff to all the important banquets. They were the masters of seeing and being seen. That's all they really wanted. They were just putting on a show. They knew how to hold their arms up in prayer. They knew what proper pious platitudes they should say. They pretended to be holy. But they were not holy. They spoke about following God. They demanded that others live holy lives. But they did not live as people committed to God. They just dressed the part. Jesus called them hypocrites. The word *hypocrite* came from the Greek word for actor.

God saw them. And God sees us. He looks at us and sees some of us putting on a show. He sees some religious leaders wearing costumes and saying all the proper things, but carrying on immoral actions that could not emanate from the soul of a holy person. He sees some people who proclaim their Christianity, but in reality are not open to God in their lives. He sees some people who pretend to be a kindly, but who are really carrying years of hate within their hearts.

God also sees those who are really trying to live their commitment to Him. He sees us at our best not just when we are at our worst. He knows how we are trying to be better, to do better. He knows how we are fighting against any tendency we might have to be hypocrites ourselves.

Still, on the weekend after Halloween, the weekend after the children said, "Boo", we are faced with some of the most frightening words in scripture. We are told that we cannot be satisfied with the outward appearance of religion. We are told to fight against our own hypocrisy. How can we do this? For one thing, we cannot demand more from others than we demand from ourselves. As a priest, I cannot demand that others fulfill their worship obligations if I do not fulfill mine. I cannot stand here and tell you that you need to say prayers at home every day if I am not faithful to saying the Liturgy of the Hours, what used to be called the Divine Office. I cannot encourage you to say the rosary, if I don't say the rosary. I cannot ask you to tithe, if I do not tithe myself. I cannot demand that you fight against immorality if I partake in immorality.

You also cannot demand that others be kind and caring, if you are mean to that daughter-in-law or son-in-law you've never liked. If you are a young adult, you cannot claim to be a Christian if you are nasty to other people. If you are still in school, you cannot claim to be a Christian if you join those who hurt others in your class. You cannot call others be good Catholics if you destroy people's reputations with snide remarks, gossip or even outright attacks on social media.

We have to avoid playing dress up. Our lives cannot be an act. We have to fight against our own hypocrisy.

We also have to avoid masking our Christianity. We do this when we just go along with the group, being more concerned with being a member of that group instead of a member of God's group, His family.

And we have to take responsibility for our own lives rather than just join a crowd that entrusts their lives to others. We cannot be followers of other people, be they religious or political, to such an extent that we allow them to determine our actions, or even our lives. We cannot allow the mob mentality to take over our lives. We cannot be part of the hate mongers. We have the ability to set the course of our own lives. We must take responsibility for our faith lives. Call no man "father" or "rabbi" or "teacher" means "call no man guru." If we have a guru, then we don't take responsibility for what we do. We call our priests father in that they are the head of our faith family in our parishes, but we do not give our priests the position of guru, entrusting them with the responsibility for our lives. We entrust our lives to God and God only. Only Christ can be our guide.

If we, you and I, can find the courage to let Jesus be our guide, if every aspect of our lives reflects the presence of Jesus in the world, then we will not wear masks. Then we would really and truly be followers of Christ.

Last Tuesday was Halloween. Halloween is for children. Following Jesus is the serious work of people who have no need for masks. Following Jesus is the serious work of those who are willing to expose their faces and their lives to the world. People admire us Catholics with our determination to worship God and to live for Him.

They see how we are united in our faith, and how our Church is universal. They witness the charity of the Church throughout the world, particularly in places of famine and sickness. And they look to us to live lives that are wholesome, sincere, and genuine.

May they have the courage to be Catholic.