

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – October 21-22, 2017 – Reflection

“Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?”

St. Matthew's Gospel invites us into the precincts of the Temple where Jesus is teaching. In the past He has upset the self-righteous religious legalists with His simplifying of the commandments and His seeming to welcome those who are sinners and unclean to God's love and favor. If He keeps carrying on like this, He'll threaten their power base and destroy the ancient and holy religion handed on to the Jews by Moses. He must be stopped and exposed for the fraud He is!

They decide to set a trap for Him. The Roman Empire has conquered Israel and exacts heavy taxes from her people. The Jews have always chafed at paying off a foreign power. But that foreign power has all the power to enforce its laws and collect its fees. If they ask Jesus if it's right to pay taxes to the Emperor, He's damned no matter what He might say. If He tells the people to pay up, they'll think He's just another lily-livered collaborator with no guts, and they'll walk away from Him. And, if He says don't pay, the Romans will surely hear of it and arrest Him as a threat to the Empire.

So one of the leaders springs the trap with a shouted question from the crowd, “Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar, or not?”

There's a hush as the people wait to hear how the Teacher will answer. Jesus rolls His eyes in exasperation at the leaders' oily, smarmy tactics and barely conceals His disgust with their tactics. “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?” Hypocrites He calls them ... actors on a stage, playing a part, hiding behind makeup and a mask.

Then He springs a trap of His own to draw these rats out into the open. They were always so concerned about ritual purity, so careful that nothing foreign should be on their person that would soil them, that no one who wasn't a pillar of right conduct should ever enter the Temple of the Lord. Jesus asked them to show Him the coin they'd have to pay the tax with. It was a Roman coin, a foreign coin, with the graven image of Caesar, the god, on it. No Pharisee would touch such a filthy coin. It would be blasphemy to carry it! They all reached into their pockets. They all managed to produce a coin. What phonies! What hypocrites! What creeps spouting pious platitudes and parading around as saints while secretly disregarding the very laws they purported to hold sacred!

This past week, one of the moguls of Hollywood, a much-praised and Oscar-winning producer, has been in the news after his years of abusing young actresses finally came to light. Actors and politicians, who knew of this creep's escapades for years, but kept quiet to save their own skins and positions, have been crawling over one another in a mad rush to issue statements that condemn the misbehavior, expressing their shock and disgust. Hypocrites! Phonies!!

Maybe Jesus has invited us good church-going people to the Temple today ... we who preach and lead, we who parent and teach, we who judge and opine ... maybe Jesus has invited us here today to look in the mirror of His eyes at the image you project, to listen carefully to the words you speak and the ideas you embrace. And then, ask yourself if the image I show the world, the me I let people see, the actions I take when the audience is watching is the same as who I am inside, how I act when the spotlight's off, what the real state of my soul is like.

If what you see is not really what you get, don't you have some work to do, some changes to make? If you're a sinner, shouldn't you ask for the Good Lord's forgiveness and resolve to change your ways? Or are you okay with being a hypocrite, a phoney??