

## Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B - OLPH 2015

### Gospel of Mark

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During this **year of the Consecrated Life**, it is fitting to say a few words about **celibacy**. Today's 2<sup>nd</sup> reading is part of Paul's teaching on celibacy. Celibacy has always been an important subject of discussion among Christians in the entire history of Christianity. In our own time, especially in the wake of recent scandals among celibates in the church, it has become even more important for us to have a better understanding of celibacy. We cannot improve the practice of celibacy in the church unless we improve our understanding of it.

Jesus teaches that **celibacy is not a lifestyle** people normally choose but a **gift that God gives** to some individuals. Jesus had just finished teaching the people about how marriage between man and woman should not be dissolved under any circumstance. His full-time companions, the Twelve disciples, remark that if that is the case, then it is not advisable to marry. Jesus answers, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given." (Matthew 19:11). He then goes on to **recommend celibacy**, encouraging his disciples to consider it as a way of life.

It is important to note that there is only **one justifiable reason** for adopting celibacy. It is not to avoid the problems of marriage or the challenges of dealing with the hassles of raising kids. Christian celibacy is for one and one reason only, for **the sake of the kingdom of heaven**. Paul would later throw more light on what this means.

Even though Jesus recommended celibacy only to his full-time followers, the disciples, Paul recommends it to all believers. Following the example of Jesus, who was celibate, Paul himself lived a celibate life. Yet he recognised that celibacy is a gift not given to all. Paul obviously sees **celibacy as the "better" way to serve God**, but does not promote celibacy for its own sake.

For Paul the only celibate life that is worth living is one that frees the person to give "**unhindered devotion to the Lord**" (verse 35). It releases one from the business of raising a family so that one can devote oneself wholeheartedly to pleasing and serving God. If celibacy should become a burden rather than a liberation for God's service, then it should be reconsidered.

In the current debate on celibacy in the church, there are **two extremes to avoid**. One is that the discipline of celibacy is an outdated relic that should now be discarded. This is wrong because celibacy is a **gift from God** to certain individuals for the good of building up God's kingdom on earth. The other is that celibacy, even when it is clearly not working, is always better than marriage. This may be Stoic thinking but is not the Christian message. We need to thank God for the gift of celibacy in the church and pray for a better

understanding and practice of celibacy in the church not as a constraint but as a way to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord among the people of God.

A philosopher once said that the **aim of philosophy** should be not just to explain the world but to change it. The same can be said about the gospel we preach and teach. The people of Capernaum received sacred instruction in their synagogue every Sabbath. Then one Sabbath they had a different teacher, Jesus. What Jesus taught them that day, as well as the way he presented and demonstrated his message, utterly amazed them. Jesus' teaching contrasted sharply with that of the scribes - simply said: Jesus taught with authority, the scribes did not. What does it mean to teach with authority? When we compare and contrast the teaching of Jesus with that of the scribes we notice **three distinguishing qualities**: The teaching of Jesus is (a) from the heart and not just from the head, (b) focuses on the spirit and not on the letter of the law, and (c) inspires a positive change of heart in the hearers.

**Jesus teaches from the heart.** He teaches with absolute conviction because he knows that his message is in accordance with the will of God. His preaching is a personal testimony of his intimate relationship with God his Father. The scribes, on the other hand get their knowledge not from their personal communion with God but from their long and intricate study of commentaries on the Law. As a result, most of their teaching is from the head as they try to recall the portions of the commentaries that apply to the situation at hand.

A second difference between the teaching of Jesus and that of the scribes lies in the **content of the message**. Whereas the scribes seek to apply the prescription of the Law to the letter, Jesus goes deeper to find the spirit, the original intent of the law. Consequently Jesus is able to discover the positive value that the law seeks to protect whereas the scribes busy themselves with words and their minutest applications.

Take, for example, the **law of Sabbath observance**. The scribes busy themselves trying to determine precisely when the Sabbath begins and ends, and what constitutes work and what doesn't. Jesus rather seeks the mind of God who gave the law to His people as an expression of His fatherly care and love. His conclusion: the Sabbath is a day we keep away from our work in order to serve God and do God's work (John 5:17). On account of this positive accent of his message, people perceive the teaching of Jesus as liberating good news in contrast to that of the scribes which they perceive as a heavy burden.

**The final difference** between the teaching of Jesus and that of the scribes is that Jesus' teaching is always intended to bring about a **positive change of heart** in the people, not just to make the people feel guilty. Whereas the scribes teach whatever makes sense in terms of their understanding of the Law and Traditions, Jesus teaches that which makes a positive difference. Presented with a man blind from birth, the scribes seek to

explain why he is blind -- whether it was he who sinned or his parents. Jesus, on the other hand is only interested in curing the blindness. For this reason Jesus performed miracles together with his teaching, to show that his primary concern is to **change the human condition** not just to explain it.

**What is our attitude**, what is our response to the word of God when we hear it? Do we allow it to challenge us and bring about a positive difference in our lives or is it simply to satisfy some intellectual curiosity? If it is the gospel of Jesus that we hear, then we cannot hear it week after week and remain the same - we will and **we must change**.