

The Chair of Moses

Homily on Matthew 23:1-12 – Queenship of Mary

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I have sat in the chair of Moses. Really, we have pictures. It was not comfortable, although it wasn't as bad as the presider's chair in Holy Name Cathedral, which was clearly designed by someone unfamiliar with the design of the human spine. The chair of Moses was a feature of 1st century synagogues. All synagogues in that era were oriented towards Jerusalem. The bema (no relation to my name) or sanctuary was at the Jerusalem end of the building and the chair of Moses was at the opposite end, just inside the main door. The Mundelein pilgrims visited a number of early synagogue sites during our time in Israel and one of them had an intact seat of Moses, in which I sat.

In the gospel text we read today from Saint Matthew, we hear Jesus take on the religious leaders of his time. This is rough stuff. If we were there in the crowd, I suspect it would have sounded like something out of the reality show, *Bar Rescue*, where John Tapper, a somewhat unique management consultant, basically does interventions on owners and staff who have so lost touch with reality that their businesses are failing.

While I suspect I am the first preacher to ever use *Bar Rescue* as an analogy for the interpretation of Matthew 23, I think it is justified when we look at what Matthew reports Jesus saying. Jesus talks about blindness. The failure of the religious leaders comes from this blindness. Jesus mentions three kinds of blindness and implicit in all is a fourth. The three are the religious leaders' blindness about their own hypocrisy, about their view of reality, and about the fundamentals of religion. The religious leaders don't see that their practice contradicts their teaching. They don't see that the casuistic reasoning they use has no validity. They also don't see that their interpretations contradict the fundamentals of the revelation.

The fourth blindness is really the source of the other three, they have lost the connection between religious practices and justice, mercy and faithfulness of the God of Abraham. Indeed, they have set them against God's faithfulness.

Anyone living the ministerial life, priest, deacon, or lay ecclesial minister, anyone with the care of souls, must overcome and guard against these forms of blindness. We must first of all acknowledge God as the actor in ministry. We must constantly see Christ as the one who in the present moment relates us to God. And we must understand our ministry (a word which means service) as a participation in Christ's ministry. Conscious awareness of these three truths will protect us from arrogance and allow us to develop the virtue of humility.

This was the original reason for the chair of Moses in the synagogue. The one who sat in the chair was only a servant of the Law. Moses presence was continued through the application of judgment in the community based on the Law. The rabbi

participated in the lineage of Moses. Rabbis would come and go, but the Law and the Chair would remain.

But when the chair changed from participation to privilege, then the trouble started. And this trouble was not limited to the first century. The feast we celebrate today of the Queenship of Mary calls to mind how in the middle ages Mary's intercession was sought because preachers had cast Jesus as a stern judge. Mary came to express the compassion of God. Popular piety, then, corrected errors in the preaching of the church's pastors. Mary's solicitude for all of us and her intercession reminds us of God's merciful nature. Mary also stands as a model for priests and other ecclesial ministers of the attitudes which should characterize our care of souls.

As we pray about these scriptures today, let us guard against the blindness Jesus identifies in the religious leaders. And let us examine our notions of God, making sure we are approaching him as gracious and merciful. And let us ask Mary for her intercession, that we may be faithful in the witness of our lives.