

Homily Matthew 23:1-12

On Palm Sunday, the Sunday before His death, Jesus sat on a donkey and slowly, humbly, made His triumphant entry into Jerusalem fulfilling the ancient prophecy of Zechariah. He spent the night in Bethany with His close friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The next day, He set out for the Temple and on the way, He stopped and cursed a fig tree for not bearing fruit. Scripture scholars believe this is a message for all of us: a true, living faith, must bear spiritual fruit in our lives. Jesus moved on to the Temple and cleared it of the corrupt money changers. So far, a very shocking and productive week. Shocking for the people witnessing Jesus' actions. Productive for Jesus who is on a mission.

Jesus is now at the Temple. Imagine standing in front of a building that makes up about one-fourth of an average city and occupies an area equivalent to thirty-five football fields. That's what Jewish pilgrims would see when they approached the gigantic Temple to worship the one, true God. The immensity of the Temple is not surprising, considering this sacred building—and all that it stood for—was the very center of Jewish life. This was the place where the God of the universe came to meet His chosen people. The Jews believed that the Temple housed God's awesome presence in its innermost chamber called the Holy of Holies. As the connecting point between heaven and earth, the Temple came to be known as the place where God's holiness radiated outward to the rest of creation. What went on in the sacred space of the Temple—sacrifice, worship, and the dwelling of God's presence—was a reminder for God's people of the praise and worship that should resonate from all corners of the world.

In addition to being the focal point for worship and sacrifice, the Temple also served as the center for Jewish government, their judicial system, and their trade and economics. To compare it to today, we could say that the Temple in Jerusalem was the first-century Jewish version of the Vatican, the White House, the Supreme Court, and Wall Street all wrapped into one. The Temple stood out as the number one symbol for Jewish national identity. On Tuesday, the day of today's Gospel story, Jesus and His disciples returned to Jerusalem. They passed the withered fig tree and Jesus again spoke about faith. Over at the Temple, the Jewish leaders were upset because Jesus established Himself as a religious authority. They were scheming and thinking of ways to trap Him. This was nothing new for Jesus. They were working the same old play book. Up until now, Jesus occasionally debated with the leaders and treated them with moderation and restraint.

Jesus was not one to walk away from an opportunity to spread the Good News of the kingdom of God. He was not one to look at the ground and remain silent as accusations and challenges were thrown at Him. He was not going to be cancelled by the religious and cultural leaders of the day.

Our second reading and the Gospel might be called “A Tale of Two Pharisees.” In the Gospel, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and instructs the disciples to do as they say not as they do. In our second reading, we hear from another Pharisee, the Apostle St. Paul, the great evangelist of the early Church. What distinguishes the two? Why do the Pharisees in Matthew’s Gospel come under such sharp and constant criticism and St Paul, the other Pharisee, is held in high esteem? The difference is in the friendship of Christ. The religion of the Pharisees became a religion of flashiness, display, and we could even say brazenness. They fulfilled their obligations, and their outward piety was perfection. They wore *phylacteries* and that is a word that needs some explanation as well as the reference to the length of their tassels.

In the book of Exodus God commanded that the Israelites remember the day He brought them out of Egypt. He told them, “It will be like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the LORD will be on your lips: with a strong hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt.” Therefore, every day at prayer, except for the Sabbath and special holy days, Jews wore *phylacteries*. *Phylacteries* are little leather boxes that are strapped on the wrist and worn on the forehead that contain little scrolls with Scripture written on them. The Pharisees wore them constantly, not just during prayer, and made sure they were large enough for all to see.

In the Book of Numbers God commanded His people to make *tassels* for the corners of their garments and fasten them with violet cords. This was so that when they looked at them, they would remember God’s commandments. The Pharisees enlarged these fringes to show their zeal for the law. The intention of the Pharisees was to dress and act in such a way as to draw attention to themselves so people would admire their piety. Jesus would have none of it! He called them out on that and all the other special treatments they cherished. He called the Pharisees “hypocrites,” which can be translated as “actors.” They put on a show but were not the genuine article. They gave clear directions about the road to take, but they weren’t too good at traveling on it themselves. While they only went as far as looking good, the Pharisee, Paul, offers a positive picture of what it means to serve God’s people. It means being as gentle as a

nursing mother cares for her children. It means sharing not only the words of the Gospel but sharing our very selves. It is no coincidence that today, the beginning of National Vocations Awareness Week, coincides with today's readings. The words of Scripture today are as powerful as when they were spoken thousands of years ago. If the leaders, teachers, bishops, priests, and deacons of the Church are not embodiments of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who will believe it?

Today's readings affirm the great expectation that Jesus has of us. All who follow Christ, the clergy and the faithful, are to not just look good, we must BE good. We must not just speak of humility; we must BE humble. We must not lay heavy burdens on people; we must LIGHTEN the burdens. Jesus is very clear concerning God's call. The Church Jesus established is to be dedicated to loving, accompanying, and shepherding souls. The focus is not on self. The focus is outward; reaching out to those Jesus calls His lambs, His sheep.

Although we focus on vocations this week, it is an ongoing process. By focusing on awareness, we quickly realize that all of us, the entire Body of Christ is responsible for promoting vocations through prayer and support. Research suggests that community encouragement plays an important role in the discernment process...and the discernment process involves all of us. God never stops calling...it is we who stop listening or let the noise of the times drown God out. The shortage of clergy and religious is not due to God's silence...it is due to our silence. We need to tone down the noise of day-to-day busyness so we can hear the word of God or help others to hear His call.

I would like to address those who may be feeling the tug of God on their hearts. If you are feeling the tug of the Lord on your heart, you need to respond through prayer and speaking with those who can help you discern, such as a priest, a spiritual director, your confessor, someone who you trust. God is patiently waiting for your response.

Now I would like to address the Body of Christ. All of us need to encourage others to recognize the promptings of the Holy Spirit and not be shy about approaching the discussion of a vocation. Our enthusiasm and willingness to speak directly to others about vocations just might be the conversation someone needs to take the next step in saying yes to Jesus.