

### **August 30, 2015 Hypocrites Homily:**

My brothers and sisters, sometime, in the late seventies, the members of the graduating class of Harvard Medical School were asked to select a speaker for their impending graduation ceremony. The administration gave them free reign to select a person of their choice. Did they choose a Nobel Prize winner for medicine, a renowned author, a prominent teacher in the field of medicine? No! They selected an American actor, Alan Alda. Why? Because Mr. Alda had played the role of a physician in the long running television series, M.A.S.H.. As an actor, he knew virtually nothing about medicine. But in a celebrity culture, he was the one favored by the class.

In the cultural world of Jesus actors were considered as unworthy of any honors. Rabbis held them in contempt because stage acting was inherited from the pagan Greeks. By embracing Greek culture, a Jew might lose his identity and become assimilated into a culture which was considered accursed by the teachers of Israel.

In the New Testament, the word hypocrite is used seventeen times. It is interesting to note the word means "actor", one who plays a part on the stage. An actor wears a mask, disguising his real identity. In giving a performance, he looks for approval. The word "hypocrite" later came to mean one whose life is a piece of acting without any sincerity behind it at all. In today's gospel reading from St. Mark's seventh chapter, Jesus calls his detractors hypocrites. (Mk.7:6)

Some of you may recall an award winning musical and later film, "Fiddler on the Roof". The opening number of the show is "Tradition" and is sung by the play's main character, a Jewish dairyman named Tevye. In the song Tevye asks a question: "How do we Jews keep our balance? I'll tell you in one word: Tradition. We have a tradition for everything: How to work, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. This shows our devotion to God!" It is not surprising that in Tevye's village of Anatevka, the most beloved person is the rabbi (or teacher). Oftentimes, he is called upon by his people to answer the question, "What does God expect me to do?" Tevye says: "Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof". The sheer multiplication of customs and traditions made it far more difficult for the Rabbi to satisfy the concerns of his people!

The Pharisees were often too excessive in their zeal for the Word of God. (Torah). The issue for Our Lord is that they were often just as demanding and unreasonable with the common people. They showed an inordinate concern for their own public image and sometimes wished to be in control of others, a common enough failing. Jesus looks into their hearts. He quotes the Prophet Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me" (Mk.7:7). There can be no worship of the word without faith in the heart, no worship of the letter of the law without the spirit of love animating it.

What lessons do I derive from today's gospel?

The Pharisees and scribes are harshly critical of Jesus and argue with him (Mk.7:5). So often they try to embarrass him, trip him up. Have we not met people like the Pharisees and scribes whose only intention is to complain, argue and criticize? Are we chronic

complainers? Are we too negative? Do we treat those with whom we disagree with respect? Do we give Our Lord only lip-service? Are we playacting? In truth, are our hearts far from God? Are we hypocrites? Are we simply "going through the motions"? Has our love waned for the word of God?

In today's gospel Jesus issues a command: Hear me, all of you and understand"(Mk.7:14). Let us resolve to spend more time with Jesus. He wants us to hear him. Just as importantly, his desire is that we understand and revere his teachings. Let us listen!