

Mass of Remembrance 2017
11/05/17

This weekend we celebrate our Mass of Remembrance, a chance for us to remember the people in the parish who died during the previous 12 months. But before I get into that, allow me to give you a brief explanation of one of the words Jesus uses in today's Gospel: a phylactery.

Jesus tells the crowds that the scribes and Pharisees preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens. Then He says they widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. So what is a phylactery? The definition in the Dictionary of the Bible is rather long so I won't cite the entire meaning here. Suffice it to say, a phylactery, which is still in use in Jewish worship, is worn on either the head or the arm.

The one worn on the head has four hollow spaces into which are inserted four miniature scrolls that contain the four most important passages from the Old Testament. The one worn on the arm contains one hollow space, into which is inserted one scroll but with the same four passages. In essence, the passages allude to keeping the law of Yahweh before one's eyes and in one's heart. And what did those four passages say? Basically they said one was to love God above all else, which is exactly what Jesus said in the Gospel we heard last week.

So when Jesus talked about widening phylacteries, He was calling out the scribes and Pharisees on their self-centered need to have people know how pious they were. Widening a phylactery would make it easier to see and therefore prove their holiness. But before He talks about the widening of these articles, He tells His listeners to do and observe all they are told, but not to follow the example.

We have similar phrases in our culture today: do as I say not as I do; practice what you preach; and of course the words attributed to our patron, St. Francis: preach the Gospel always and if you must, use words.

In the At Home with the Word commentary series, the authors suggest compassion for the wounded and rest for the weary have no place in the piety of the scribes and Pharisees. They are fascinated with their own perfection; obsessed with their own righteousness, they come to believe that God shares their obsession. If, even for a moment, they were able to recognize the beauty of the humble Christ, the crust of pride imprisoning their hearts would crack; their arms would open to welcome the weak, the ignorant, and the wounded.

As I looked over the list of names of the 49 people who died over the past 12 months, I was immediately aware we lost some true giants. I was also aware we missed two from last year and so, as you look at the list and notice someone is missing, please let me know and we'll correct it for next year.

They ranged in age from Janelle Langdon who was 46 to sweet little Elizabeth Biebel who made it to 102. I fondly remember her humility a couple of years ago as I recognized her on her 100th. "Why make all the fuss?" she asked. I told her turning 100 was worthy of a fuss. Ed Sosnoski didn't quite reach 101; he got within 2 months and there were 5 who made it into their 90's.

I put together a brief bio about many of those we lost, based on what the families told me and as you look it over, you'll notice over and over how many times references were made to love of family, especially love of the grandchildren. Greg and Karen Gallahue had been married 58 years and died within 54 days of each other. Dan and Kathy Smith got within a few days of celebrating their 60th. And the list goes on and on.

Let me finish by getting back to the Gospel, because I think each and every one of the people being honored this weekend embodied what it means to be a Christian. Mahatma Gandhi once said that he liked our Christ but didn't like Christians because we Christians are so unlike our Christ. Well, I believe that if Gandhi had met our dearly departed, he would have changed his mind, because the 49 we lost were a most likeable bunch..