

31st Sunday A (Matt 23:1-12)

Toward the end of today's Gospel, Jesus gives us his interpretation of greatness, what it means to be a great man or woman. "The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest." Greatness means different things to different people. To some it may mean prominence, but Jesus was not talking about prominence here. Prominence comes to a select few people, and in the final analysis, prominence bears no relationship to true greatness. A person can be great without being famous, nor numbered among the "rich and famous," for fame can be achieved without a person becoming great. Deep down inside each one of us is the desire to be somebody, to get somewhere, to amount to something. In our finest hour we would like to live our lives in such a fashion that at the end, those who knew us best could look back and say, "He was truly a great man; She was truly a great woman." And such an inscription could be on our tombstone with great accuracy.

This is what Jesus was talking about- nothing so shallow as fame or fortune, but a quality of life that can be called true greatness. Jesus believed that there could be no greatness apart from sincerity. Sincerity is the basic virtue, which in its absence renders all other virtues null and void. If a person is dishonest and deceitful at the very center of life, then nothing he or she says can count for much. Love, for example. Who wants to be loved insincerely? Is there any such thing as insincere love? I think I'd rather deal with sincere hatred than insincere love. At least I would know where I stood. Insincerity takes the loveliest qualities of life and reduces them to a worthless counterfeit. You can't be a great person and a phony. Jesus calls us to take a look at the hypocrite in each one of us and to make a real effort to be honest. Sincerity is an essential of true greatness.

True greatness requires humility, a virtue at the top of Jesus' scale of values. Humility comes from the Latin, "humus," earth, groundedness in reality and truth. Humility and truth are one, says Aquinas. Humility is basically the freedom from the illusion of independence. In childhood, we are dependent on parents for sustenance, nurturing, and growthful care. As we grow through adolescence into adulthood, we move toward a healthy and mature interdependence, always in relationship and never in total isolation. Humility is the starting point of our relationship with other people and with the God who relates to us in trusting love. "Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart," Jesus tells us. As we learn from him, we can achieve the greatness he calls us to. "The greatest among you is the one who serves the rest." And Jesus shows us the way, he who is "Way, Truth, and Life."

Al Grosskopf, S.J.