

22nd Sunday of Year

What is the difference between an actor and a confidence trickster? When I was a student in Rome I often passed a beggar seated on a blanket near the bus stop. He appeared to have only one leg. One day I was earlier than usual and saw him jump off the bus, lay out his blanket and then fold his leg up beneath him! It was an act of deception to make money very different from an actor playing a part on a stage. What makes the difference is a frame – stage or screen – that gives us the context. This tells us that what is happening is art rather than reality. Also the intention is not to deceive us but simply to take us into a different world. A good actor inhabits the world of the play and is convincing – unless it is some highly stylised form of theatre such as opera or ballet.

The Greek philosopher Plato had no time for any kind of acting. For him only the unchanging, heavenly ideal counted. Anything less than this was illusory – deception whether or not intentional. However, things are not always so clear-cut. There is ‘street-theatre’ and role play as part of training. Children’s play and make believe is an important part of learning about the world and different situations they have not experienced. Playing a role can be part of striving to become what we are not yet as well as pretending that we other than we are.

There are times when we play the role that is expected of us whether at work or at home conscious that what people see is not the whole story – we are doing our best to live up to expectations. There can also be times when we hide behind appearances. Sometimes play acting can take over to the point where the role played and life can become confused. This can happen with video games when people begin to act out in real life what they see or do on the screen. It can happen when actors become too absorbed in a role or their public persona. It was said of Peter Sellers that it was very difficult to get through his myriad roles to the real person.

In today’s Gospel Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites. The Greek word ‘hypocrite’ means ‘actor’. He is saying to them, ‘Don’t play act your religion! Live it in reality – from the heart!’ He is not necessarily accusing them of trying to deceive others. He is telling them that they are fooling themselves by confusing external obedience with the love and worship of God. Other people can only see the outside – what we do – but God sees the heart. Jesus often uses role play with the apostles during his public ministry. He teaches them through parables and then sends them out to preach and heal as a preparation for their future responsibility after Pentecost. Sometimes they get it wrong and things don’t go as expected. They fall to squabbling about who is the most important.

We are not perfect. The Commandments are a source of wisdom and guidance not just rules to be followed. They provide us with a template or script to follow putting flesh on the two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbour. It is important to stretch ourselves through trying to be better than we are. When what we are trying to do becomes second nature and springs from our hearts this will be the sign of success. Our Lord is not telling us to settle for imperfection and just to be honest about it. He is telling us to inhabit the role we play to the point where it comes from the heart. Then it stops being an act or simple aspiration and becomes who we really are. By God’s grace we will become windows through which others can see the truth of God’s love.