

Dear Friends,

How often are we misled by talk or appearances? We have many proverbs that caution us against such susceptibility. Nevertheless, we are still easily hoodwinked by glossy presentation or weasel words. Sometimes the position of a person impresses us. Perhaps it is the need in us to be reassured, that uncertainty which asks a professional for honest advice when their main concern may be selling us something. There will always be someone only too willing to take advantage of our vulnerability. The difficulty today is that the skills of advertising have leapt from the marketplace to nearly every aspect of life. We are all asked to sell ourselves in some way, by which is usually meant that we are required to spend our energies more on the appearance of what we are offering than on its real content.

Too often there is a gap between the glossy presentation and the reality within. As we spend so much time on the appearance of what we are offering, we can lose sight of the actual content. We have a lovely brochure or website saying what sort of school, church or community we are. We may even convince ourselves of the truth of what we say. But the detached observer sees only too easily that the emperor is not wearing any clothes.

It is this sort of contradiction between word and action that Jesus identifies in the chief priests and elders. After arriving in Jerusalem he enters into debate with them about the genuine fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. There is always a temptation for leaders to believe too much in their own authority. They tend to think that, because they have such an important position in society, what they say must be true. Jesus challenges such an assumption. There must always be a coherence between what we preach to others and what we do ourselves. John the Baptist had come but the people who listened to him and accepted his message, changing their lives accordingly had been the public sinners in society. The leaders and supposedly righteous people had refused to believe him, just as now they refused to believe Jesus and his message.

How do we prevent ourselves being drawn into a world of false appearances? How do we ensure that we always practice what we preach? It is easy to start out with the best of intentions, but as we have noted the nature of our world is so short thru with the idea of selling ourselves that it can be difficult to pursue an alternative path.

It is as though Jesus recognizes this difficulty by being so uncompromising in his own words and practice. His way of ensuring an integrity of word and deed is to empty himself of any claim to power or position. Elsewhere he will address the question of fancy titles. The only title he uses for himself is that of "Son of Man," and the only way of life he follows is that of a wandering preacher, with nowhere to lay his head. If we examine our own positions in life we will acknowledge just how much we are tempted to say one thing and do another, to use own power or status to achieve our ends. When we empty ourselves of such trappings of power, we have no means of pretense any more. And perhaps ironically, we now have a greater freedom to adhere to the truth, for we are no longer bound by the complex world of expectations that come from the world of propaganda. We are free to do what we say we will do.

Your friend in Jesus  
Msgr. Zach