

Today's gospel reading falls somewhat strangely on most people's ears. We are dealing with a time two thousand years before our time and religious practices that seem odd. What do we know about broad phylacteries and long fringes? What do they have to do with faith? When you don't know answers you start inventing answers and it amuses me that when many Christians of the evangelical tradition read this passage, more than a few zero in on the "call no man on earth your father" thing, as proof that Episcopalians and Roman Catholics sin by calling their priests "father." It's easy to miss the point when you are reading the gospels, especially when you are looking more at the literal word than the spirit of the text. It is the spirit of the gospel text, conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit, that conveys true meaning, and it is that understanding which enlightens faith. The thing in the gospel today, our Lord's teaching point, is that religion without heart is religion without meaning.

In the reading, our Lord spoke harshly about the scribes and the Pharisees, because they were laying on the people a burden of rules and rituals. However, by the manner in which they lived they proclaimed that the rules and rituals were, in fact, hollow. "They preach," Jesus said, "but they do not practice." A clear and present danger, always for every Christian, is that unless we truly take our Christianity to heart, each and every hour of the day, we might find that we, too preach while we do not practice!

In the gospel reading last week, we read our Lord's "Summary of the Law." It is well for us that we give it our attention. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your mind and your might and love your neighbor as you love yourself." Let me add to this what the Old Testament prophet Micah said, and that is what the Lord requires of us is justice, mercy and humility before God. In other words, faith is revealed in practice. If our lives do not reflect a love of God, a love of mercy and the practice of justice - and it is the mercy and justice that reveal our love for neighbor - then the practice of our religion is hollow and without meaning.

The world in which we live never tires of giving us challenges. The news of today distracts us from the tragedy of yesterday. These things remind us that human suffering never goes away; therefore, we are given all the more opportunity to practice what we preach. "Love mercy, do justice and walk humbly with God." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Our own suffering wears us down, tempts us to only focus inward. It is a powerful temptation, but if we give in to it, we have lost it all.

*Amen.*