

Reflection on the Gospel-31st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 23:1-12)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Shortly after I took up a five-year term as elected leader of my religious congregation, I handed the members of my council an article about leaving office gracefully. They objected that we had only begun our ministry of leadership. What was I suggesting? I was convinced then as now that gospel-inspired leadership requires that one hold one's position lightly, ever aware that leadership is a service for a time, an opportunity to create or maintain the conditions for all in the community or organisation to take their own power and to exercise it responsibly within the parameters of their core commitment. Leaders can only call their members to authentic living of their commitment if their own lives are congruent with what they profess.

Today's gospel has particular relevance for all in positions of authority, whether as teachers or leaders of organisations or communities. Appointment or election to such positions is not for the sake of status or self-aggrandizement. Neither does the specialised knowledge associated with such roles bring with it the right to special privileges. Sadly, both civic and religious leaders can easily develop a sense of entitlement that shifts the exercise of their authority from service to privilege and oppression. That seems to have been the case for certain religious leaders in first century Palestine.

Within Second Temple Judaism, the Pharisees were the respected teachers and interpreters of the Law of Moses. Some of them abused their positions and so became the subject of Jesus' scathing and cumulative criticism. They exploited their specialised knowledge to exercise power over the people and create intolerable burdens while at the same time failing to observe their own rules. They sought the adulation of the people through their exaggerated and ostentatious observance of certain religious customs. They are accused of broadening their phylacteries, the little leather boxes containing the words of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:5) that observant Jews bound to their heads and arms, and of lengthening the tassles attached to their cloaks (in observance of Deuteronomy 22:12). They looked for special treatment, for places and titles of honour, and for public recognition.

Matthew attaches to this condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees several loosely connected sayings of Jesus that link service and humility. Greatness lies, not in the pursuit of power over others, but rather in knowing one's proper place in the scheme of things and so recognising that God is the source of all human power and authority. In *Treading Lightly: The Hidden Wisdom of the World's Oldest People*, Karl-Erik Svelby and Tex Skuthorpe demonstrate how the story of one indigenous community, the Nhunngabarra, offers a compelling alternative to hierarchical leadership in our times, namely the age-old "context-specific" leadership for sustainability. *Treading Lightly* offers a vision utterly congruent with the gospel-inspired earth-conscious leadership of Pope Francis.