

Homily based on the readings from January 19, 2026 (1 Samuel 15.16-23; Mark 2.18-22)

One of the many remarkable features of Jesus' parables is how *broadly* they can be applied. While they were often delivered in response to specific questions or situations, their significance is never limited to a simple or obvious conclusion. They consist of numerous layers and levels, which defy any attempt at narrowly defining their messages. In other words, the stories Christ tells are not *allegorical*, in the sense of having a single, predetermined meaning; instead, they are *applicable*, in that they can enlighten almost any person, in any state of life.

Today's Gospel reading does not exactly present a parable, but rather a concrete image – that of a person pouring new wine into an old wineskin. In case anyone is unfamiliar with the technicalities, it was common at the time to store unfermented grape juice in a sort of leather pouch. The juice, as it fermented, produced carbon dioxide that caused the pouch to expand. A wineskin was typically flexible enough to

withstand this stretching process once, but not twice. As a result, most people knew better than to try to reuse old wineskins.

The context for this conversation was the people's complaint that Christ's disciples failed to observe certain prescribed periods of fasting. In a specific sense, Jesus is telling them that they are dealing with an entirely new covenant, so the old regulations are no longer valid. Nevertheless, there is also a broader aspect to his teaching – one that transcends the particular details of this situation and applies to a universal set of experiences.

In each of our lives, there are many occasions when God expects us to abandon a practice or attachment that is keeping us away from *him*. A lesson we can learn from the wineskins is that we must never hesitate to discard the old and embrace the new, as long as we are doing so for the sake of the Gospel. I could mention numerous examples from my own life, but I will focus briefly on the most obvious one. As some of you know, I grew up in a particular Protestant denomination. As a young

adult, I remained fervently attached to certain aspects of that tradition, even though I was forced to acknowledge its inherent defects. At some point, through the grace of God and with the help of some forthright guidance, I gained enough clarity simply to walk away – casting away my old wineskins and embracing something entirely new. The point here is *not* that I did anything wise or virtuous – but that the only impediment cutting me off from the fullness of the Catholic faith was my own impoverished, shortsighted attitude.

I am sure, with a bit of reflection, that each of us could share similar stories – specific to our own background and experiences. Nevertheless, the challenge for us all, moving forward, is to continue identifying the worn out wineskins in our own lives. If anything is separating us from Christ, we must not hesitate to dispose of it. Just like the Pharisees – who were unable to recognize the promised Messiah in their midst – the greatest obstacle to our growth as Christians does not come from outside ourselves, but from within. The Lord is *longing* to welcome us all into

his loving embrace, as long as we are not so prideful as to push him away.