



## 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time



**Date:** Sunday, September 8, 2019 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C

**First Reading:** Wisdom of Solomon 9:13–18b

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 90:3–6, 12–14, 17 | **Response:** Psalm 90:1

**Second Reading:** Philemon 1:9–10, 12–17

**Gospel Acclamation:** Psalm 119:135

**Gospel Reading:** Luke 14:25–33

**Preached at:** the Jesuit Institute and the Catholic Church of the Resurrection in Bryanston in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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**I**n our readings today we are once again reminded of the humility we need in our relationship with God, and with creation, and with each other. This humility – we can recall – was a key feature of last week’s readings where we realized how humility was a truthful attitude and an awareness of our place before God and within God’s creation. It was knowing our place – but also accepting the place of others alongside us. Being humble often means we need to recognize where we have been wrong, and admit that we need to learn, for the Lord is our refuge as we heard in the Psalm, and from him we will learn true wisdom.

In our Gospel today, we hear how Jesus wants us to be serious about how we live our Christian life, so that we live it ever more consciously and fully, and be ready to bear the cost of that discipleship – for true discipleship requires a holistic conversion – intellectually, morally, and religiously. In the process of this conversion, Jesus calls us to be ready to renounce what we hold dear. Sometimes that can be an ideological way of thinking, or recognizing how we have been in bondage to a false idol. We need the humility in order to ask for the courage and grace and gifts from God to be free before God again. It will often mean admitting we were wrong and in need of conversion.

In our second reading we see how Paul “would prefer to do nothing without your consent, in order that goodness might not be a compulsion, but of your own free will.” We have to choose to be good. We have to accept our responsibility to change and convert – because God did not create puppets. He gave us free will. We can sin freely, and we can love freely. It is our choice. But so often our choices are not free. They are not conscious. We need to awaken and consider

how we behave and what informs our behaviour, and how we permit others to behave in our names. Can we say that we challenge bad behavior in ourselves, our society, or our Church? Can we stand up in the face of injustice? Or do we hide?

In our first reading we are confronted with our limitations, and hear the desire – one I am sure we can share – to know and do God’s will. We recognize how Wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit, sent by God to help us understand the truth of our existence and our created world. We hear how, with such Wisdom, “the paths of those on earth were set right, and men were taught what pleases you, and were saved by wisdom.”

How crooked have our paths been of late? And just how much, in this past week in South Africa, have we been in need to have our ‘paths set right’, for just how wrong have we been, how far have we fallen?

Our televisions and radios have shared the trauma and the horror of femicide, the scourge of gender-based violence and the hatred of xenophobia. Our inner cities have become charred battlefields littered with the destruction left after what happens when our leaders lead us irresponsibly and utter words that blunt and blind our consciences, that ignore and injure our neighbours, and reject and kill our human brothers and sisters.

I urge you all to read Monday’s Press Statement from the Jesuit Institute, it’s on our website and on the noticeboard at the main entrance, as well as some of the articles published in [spotlight.africa](http://spotlight.africa) this week, and the powerful bulletin piece from the Jesuit Institute, also at the entrance. As we, and others, have noted this week, xenophobic rhetoric leads to xenophobic behaviour. Our leaders should apologise and lead more ethically. I do not want to repeat what is said in those places – but it would not be wrong to say that after this week in South Africa we are all becoming more consciously aware of our collective need for a wiser way of living together; that we are desirous for prophetic leadership in our country that can construct peace, and overcome differences and divisions so that we might – with each other, with ourselves and with God – live and work and love in harmony.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will realize that we need God's gift of wisdom. To see the error of our past ways, and to make the changes necessary because of the enlightenment gifted to us by the Holy Spirit. We need, however, to be humble enough to continuously ask for wisdom.

Sometimes people – especially people in the Church – have a conception of the truth as this static reality that was handed down to us 2,000 years ago. They hang onto the importance of tradition in the Catholic Church, but they see it as closed and unchanging – they are unaware that all our truths are products of a development within the history of the church. I want to tell you today that that static notion is not actually how the Church sees things – it is in fact an error. A true understanding of tradition in the Church is that it is alive, and that it therefore grows and develops. Our concept of the truth is that it is a person, Jesus Christ, the Word, the Son of God. And the more we reflect upon Jesus we are invited into a deeper understanding, a living communion, a richer revelation. It is not that we change our minds – but we gradually become more aware of the depth and beauty of that truth. In changing times, we must ask ourselves that difficult question, what would Jesus do? For then will our eyes be opened and hearts be softened, as we encounter Jesus in our lives again, in our time, in our space. In our Gospel Jesus asks those who come to him to hate his other relationships. I think this is relative – in other words, we must love Jesus more than any other, and be prepared to follow him whatever the cost – even if it requires us to be converted from our culture or position. Do we trust God enough to allow ourselves to be changed and transformed?

Such a thing happened to Paul with regards to Onesimus in the 2nd reading. Onesimus was Philemon's slave – but in the 2nd reading Paul writes to Philemon and says he is returning Onesimus and that Philemon must treat him, his former slave, like a 'beloved brother' in Christ. Elsewhere in Paul's writing, in Galatians 3:28, we read "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus". It is not that in Paul's time those distinctions suddenly disappeared, but he was teaching us that, in light of Christ and our relationship with him, these differences suddenly ceased to matter. I mention this because within the Christian message there is also a cultural context. This cultural context is different to our own and is not part of the truth of the Christian message. We need to do the hard work of distinguishing the Christian message from the cultural context, and of

enculturating the Christian message into our own culture today. Our culture today desires to reject patriarchy, and values equality and greater transparency in all its institutions. We need to see even where the Church needs to be converted and work with the Holy Spirit in renewing the Church, maintaining the essentials of the Christian message, but disentangled from their non-essential historical cultural contexts. This requires a conversion on many levels.

If we take the case of slavery – it is a good example of an unjust situation that at the time Society and everyone in it – including the Church – did not challenge – but needed to and eventually did. It took hundreds of years to formally abolish slavery. And yet it is still with us today.

And were it not for the experiences in our country this week – I probably would have chosen to talk to you today about how slavery still exists in our modern world. Despite our growing awareness of how every person possesses human dignity that is the sign of their being created in the image and likeness of God, we still have a slave trade in our world today, human trafficking, exploited migrant labour and forced sexual prostitution are all characteristics of today's modern slavery, the product of a despairing inequality in our world that forces people to seek a better life but instead find themselves exploited. Ranked 2nd most profitable illegal activity after arms dealing, earning 32 billion US dollars annually, and according to the International Labour Organisation – affecting 40 million people a year– we need to do a lot more to eradicate such iniquity.

It goes to show that even when we recognize something as wrong – it still requires an ongoing and deliberate effort to eradicate evil from the world.

Today I want to challenge us to see what is it that we need to renounce – what is today's slavery or falsehood that we must dismiss and destroy? What false ideology or motive lies at the hearts of our sinful behaviour, individually or collectively – and can we ask God for the grace to renounce and reject these false ideas. What truth is the Holy Spirit revealing to us? Is there something God is calling us to decry in ourselves, our Church? Or our Society?

The experiences of this week echo in our hearts and minds, I'm sure. If we open our hearts to God's wisdom, I think we can realise that all of us need some form of conversion. Let's take the issue of patriarchy and the violence against women and children that was in the news this week. We must condemn this in the

strongest possible terms. For those who harmed children, Jesus had harsh words to say to such abusers: “It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.” (Lk 17:2.)

At the time Jesus said these words, children, like women, had no rights and were, like slaves, until they gained their majority. Yet Jesus challenged Society’s attitudes. Not just with children, but with women as well. When he rose from the dead he first appeared to women. We know that Mary Magdalene was the apostle to the apostles.

Yet, if we are honest, how quickly did the cultural patriarchy of that age, and our church, minimize and try to erase women’s roles in the early church. (And if you want to see some of the wonderful research being done into the role of Women in the early Church, please see some of Phylis Zagano’s research. She is a member of the Pontifical Commission examining the question of Women Deacons and has provided clear evidence of the role of women in the early Church.) If we are honest when we see the growth of Christianity and Islam in Africa, is it because of an increasingly God-fearing people in our countries, or is it rather because the inherent historical cultural patriarchy in these religions are welcomed by an already patriarchal culture in Africa. This patriarchy is sadly still with us – we still find it in our church and our society– except now we are conscious of the injustice of it. And because we are conscious of it, we can judge it and reject it for what it is – not part of the Christian message.

At the root of gender-based violence, is I think a flawed notion of superiority and hierarchy. In Africa, and South Africa, we bear the brunt of an internalized triple trauma of historical slavery, colonialism and apartheid. Generations after generations have internalized a societal norm that proclaimed a false hierarchy: firstly a superiority of race, that whites were superior to blacks; then of gender, that men were superior to women; and then of power, that the strong were superior to the ‘so-called’ weak. When white men enslaved black men, or treated black men as inferior, black men took out their anger on black women. If we listen to the experience of women, we cannot ignore how women have suffered at the hands of men – and we must repent for how this has been allowed to take place. We must re-examine how we raise our children, how we construct social roles and conceive of gender and power and race – and reject all categories and ways of thinking and behaving that seek to subdue or suppress – or even worse,

oppress – others. Not only are these no longer culturally appropriate. They are just plain wrong! We should not fear such self-examination, but rather see it as the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives trying to bring us God’s wisdom. Ultimately we must remember the wisdom of God that reminds us that these distinctions should not matter – for we are all one in Christ.

This is a lesson we must never forget – and I am painfully conscious as I stand here before you that many in the Church who should have known better, failed in this area and I can only apologise for the harm the Church, and the people who have responsibility in the Church, have caused and inspired, and to apologise again and again for the harm to women and children who have been abused. There is much to apologise for – and we can only fix the situation if we recognize the systemic nature of the change that is required, and each take up our responsibility to participate and demand a better Church, a better Society.

But we are still faced with a question. How can we construct a society, a Church, that believes and lives this belief?

We need leaders who can offer hope instead of fear; who can challenge the distrust and hatred of the strangers in our midst, and who can invite us to see our commonality, how we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. A Christ who said I have come to make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Sí* – which in this Season of Creation, if you want some homework, I think is still worth reading – joins the dots between our understanding of the human person, and how the economy and the ecology of ourselves and our planet fit together. One of the realities of our age is the increasing movement of migrants around the world – often due to the changing climates of their homelands, exacerbated by the increasing consumption of certain peoples who see themselves as superior, or entitled to consume and behave in ways regardless of the impact on the planet and other people. The slave-like treatment of migrants – in some countries even the caging of children – reveal to us how crooked our paths have become, how wrong our ways of behaving have been, and how selfish and narrow our perspectives can be, and how we allow ourselves to remain indifferent to the sufferings of those around us.

But it is not just about those in leadership. The violence in South Africa in these past days should challenge how we relate to each other. When we think of the Constitution of our country, we can see how it is a guide to create a “democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, united and prosperous society based on justice, equality, the rule of law and the inalienable human rights of all.”

Around the world, our country was recognized for, I believe, the God-given wisdom, to structure a society that respected the human rights of all and it was “built on a belief that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.” Not just citizens, but all who live in it. Our Constitution specifically envisioned us including the foreigners. Yet how quickly can such envisioned harmony collapse into chaos?

If we listen to the Holy Spirit speaking in our hearts, and recognize the collective wisdom of this moment, we must reject and condemn xenophobia and patriarchy, wherever it exists! We must reject anything that causes us to see other human beings as less than ourselves. We must do this because it is the right thing to do; it is also what Jesus calls us to do; and what the Scriptures have taught us to do. It is God’s will in other words.

My confrere James Martin reminds us of what the bible says about how we are supposed to treat migrants, refugees and foreigners.

Think how, he says, in Exodus (23:9) God told us how we should not oppress the resident alien among us, for the Jews were aliens in Egypt once; or how in Deuteronomy (10:18) God loves the stranger, and how in Psalm 146 we are told how God will protect the stranger. He asks us to recall how the wise King Solomon recommended we must listen to the foreigners (1 Kings 8:43), and how even Jesus himself said we should help them even if there is a cost for us.

In fact, for Jesus, both in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and in today’s Gospel, we know our salvation carries a cost. Our discipleship demands us to bear that cost, and in Matthew’s Gospel at the last judgment Jesus will say to some people (Mathew 25:43), ‘I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me.’ And some people will answer, ‘Lord when did we see You as a stranger and not help You?’ And he will say that, ‘Every time you did not help a stranger you did not help Me.’ (Mathew 25: 45). That is the way it will be decided who enters Heaven says Jesus.

In the face of suffering – God did not abandon us, but rather chose to suffer with us so that we would know we were not alone. God was always with the outcast – whether that is socially or culturally... Jesus even explicitly said to the woman, ‘neither do I condemn you.’ We must stop co-operating in structures that have as their assumption some faulty understanding of the equality between man and woman. We trust that God will send his Holy Spirit to be our comforter and advocate, and to gift us with God’s wisdom to see the world, and his creation, as he sees it.

Let’s pray today that we might have the humility to desire wisdom and unlearn our wicked ways.

Let’s pray that we might love our neighbour as ourselves, even when it costs us.

Let’s pray that we might consciously eradicate the patriarchy, and the xenophobia in our society, by modelling respectful relationships in our own lives and families, and repenting for our part in these evils.

I always try include some Good News in what I say from the pulpit – and today, I think that Good News is that the Lord is offering us this favourable time for us all to repent and convert. Let us seize that time, and celebrate this good news, that we might create, with our Creator, a better world, a more just world, a more liveable place for us all to live.

Finally, let us pray for all victims of sexual abuse, and those who suffered abuses of power and conscience. That the Lord will console and renew the face of the earth.

Amen.

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