



6th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, February 12, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time before Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Sirach 15:15–20

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 119:1–2, 4–5, 17–18, 33–34 | **Response:** Psalm 119:1b

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:6–10

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 11:25

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:17–37

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

In today's first reading, Sirach tells us how we have been given a choice, to keep God's commandments, if only we will to do so. We are told that we are to choose between fire and water, life and death, good and evil. Our great gift of free will requires the even greater gift of wisdom to use it well. The ability to choose well, not just between something that is good or bad, but between things that are good and better, is the skill of discernment and that requires wisdom. Wisdom, however, can often be gained through learning from our mistakes, and the mistakes of other people. We should be grateful, then, for the times we do fail, because these are precisely the opportunities that will occasion our growth in Wisdom in the future. Our Free Will is always something we can learn to exercise with greater wisdom.

Our free will also makes us responsible for our choices. Sirach's advice to us is to use our Free Will to make the right choice. But God, in the Gospel, is always wanting us to make the best choice. Every time we come to Mass we acknowledge to ourselves and to each other that we fall short in choosing that best choice when we pray the Penitential Rite together. God forgives us and we are able to start afresh and that's why we say 'Glory to God in the highest', because he does indeed have mercy on us.

God's Wisdom is often communicated in the language of laws. But legalese often fails to communicate the reality of that true Wisdom. In the second reading we learn that our choices should not be done out of obligation, but out of love.

The greatest act of Free Will is the choice to love and to be loved. When we act out of love, we are truly acting out of freedom.

This is what the Gospel is trying to tell us today. In the Gospel Jesus is inviting us to go beyond the letter of the law, instead revealing the deeper and more demanding spirit of Wisdom that inspired the law to be freely lived. The law for the Jews was not something repressive, but something to celebrate because it enabled them to live the good life. Good laws enabled human flourishing and prohibited activity that diminished our human condition.

At this point of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he takes the commands of the law and shows how they provide a blueprint for a way of being fully, genuinely, and gloriously human. St Ireneaus famously said that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. This is what living freely from our hearts out of love, rather than behaving out of obligation, means for us – to be fully alive. This new way of living, of being forgiving, faithful and truthful, goes deep down into the roots of each of our personalities and produces a different pattern of behaviour altogether.

Jesus looks at three areas where we can make the best choice. He takes the existing laws of not killing, not committing adultery and not swearing falsely, and takes them further by going deeper and explaining that the best choice is rather to choose to be peacemakers, to be faithful and to always be truthful.

First, he says, there is the choice to be a person of peace or a person of violence. Jesus points out that violence begins with an angry heart, a heart festering with hurt. We have all heard the saying 'hurt people, hurt people'. Violence begins deep within us. To be a person of peace means being a person of forgiveness because forgiveness is the only antidote to anger. Unless we forgive, anger builds — it can be slow, but eventually it will boil over and people will be hurt — usually those closest to us, those we love and care for.

Jesus believes forgiveness is so important for bringing about the kingdom of God that even if a person is about to go to Church and worship God, and that person remembers that a brother or sister has anything against him or her, he tells us to leave and to make peace first. That is when the kingdom comes to earth. The choice is to be part of a community of forgiveness. When we make that choice for other people, we allow others to make that choice for us as well.

Secondly, Jesus offers us the choice to live our relationships in fidelity. For Jesus it is not simply a matter of not committing adultery; it's a matter of honoring our own commitments and those of others from our hearts.

Jesus is being quite counter-cultural and prophetic here and he calls for wholeness in relationships between men and women, not treating one another as objects. The refusal to objectify always begins in the heart. That is what chastity is. A refusal to objectify others and to remain faithful for and to one's spouse.

For Jesus, marriage was part of the plan of God, and it mirrored God's fidelity to His chosen people. The marriage relationship was – and still is – meant to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor, not a place of danger, dishonesty, or destructiveness. By forbidding divorce Jesus was calling for a reconciled relationship between husband and wife. In the culture at that time, the wife was often abandoned for the most flimsiest of reasons. Perhaps we are seeing a return to this today in the divorce rates in our own society. For Jesus, and for us as Catholics, this law is not about keeping together what is irretrievably broken or never existed, but at always bringing about reconciliation when it is at all possible. True fidelity is only possible when we have true forgiveness.

Finally, there was a custom in Jesus' time of making oaths and calling on God to stand by one's word. Jesus is saying there should be no need for this, because we should be speakers of truth all the time.

There should be no need to call on God – or anyone else – to uphold what we say. Always speaking the truth is the honorable thing to do. There should be no need to pad what we say to each other. Jesus is asking us simply to tell the truth.

When something is as simple as "Yes" or "No," there's no room for spin, for sophistry, for fine print, or for establishing grey areas in our conscience instead of admitting that we either can or cannot deliver on something, or we do know or do not know something.

The point of today's Gospel is for us to understand the root values Jesus is calling us to: To have a heart that is forgiving, faithful, and truthful. This is the wisdom of God, that comes as a gift of God. Behind these statements is a God who wills that human society be just and merciful; that human life be nourished, and that all relationships be restored. God's laws are not meant to restrain us, but to show us how to be fully human, living out of love.

God's will lies at the heart of the law. The wisdom that is God's wisdom is a gift of the Spirit. It is not mere human wisdom, as Paul reminds us. And the power to live it is also a gift of the Spirit. We don't earn it or work our way towards it. The Spirit gives wisdom in the Spirit's own time to those who are able to understand it and appreciate it. In bringing the law of God to completion, Jesus calls us to live in love, a love that completes us and makes us whole, because it is God's love.

Jesus today is calling each of us to a radical way of living. He is sharing with us the wisdom of forgiveness, faithfulness, and truthfulness.

Let us pray today and everyday that we might be able to forgive, to be faithful and to be truthful. But let also remember to first choose to love and be loved.

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