



8th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, February 26, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time before Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Isaiah 49:14–15

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 62:2–3, 6–9 | **Response:** Psalm 62:6a

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 4:1–5

Gospel Acclamation: Hebrews 4:12

Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:24–34

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

Well we've almost reached the end of Jesus' sermon on the mount. Today's installment, following on from the last few weeks – which began with 'Blessed are the poor in Spirit' – now talks about how we cannot serve two masters... we cannot serve God and mammon.

Mammon is a Greek transliteration of an Aramaic word for wealth and possessions, but it is itself derived from a word that means "believe" or "trust". Without the vowels, it's similar to the word 'Amen' which means 'I believe, so be it' So the proper understanding of mammon is "that in which one places trust." In fact trust is the theme that characterizes todays readings. In what, or in whom, do we place our trust?

Jesus confronts his disciples with a choice and a challenge. They must choose between the service of God and the service of mammon; by personifying Mammon and portraying it as a master Jesus is emphasising how our possessions can come to possess us. Put another way, we can become enslaved to our wealth and belongings, being constantly worried about maintaining them or seeking to acquire more. Worry and greed often go together.

In saying "You cannot serve God and mammon" Jesus is meaning that if we are preoccupied with building up treasures on earth, we are serving mammon, and we cannot give to God our total, undivided service. Only by being detached from wealth and possessions, and trusting in God to provide for us, can we be free to serve him.

Now ‘wealth and possessions’ can mean different things to each one of us. Another way of thinking about it might be to ask ourselves what enslaves us – then we will know who our Master is. Addictions are a form of enslavement and can take many forms. As we listen to Jesus in the Gospel today, perhaps we might ask him to help us love God more, and to free us from what enslaves us – whether it is Mammon or anything else.

But offering our undivided attention to anything in this fast-paced, disintegrated world is always going to be a challenge. But the question remains – in whom do we trust? Do we trust at all? We live in a world where trust is in very short supply. Whether it is our politicians, or our leaders, it’s very hard to find someone to trust. But this despair in who to trust is not a new situation. Our other readings attest to this being a struggle in every age.

In the first reading we heard two short verses that recount the reassuring words of Isaiah to the exiles in Babylon 500 years or more before Christ. Their doubt —“the Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me”—is answered with a mother’s firm promise: “I will never forget you”. In our responsorial psalm, the psalmist puts his trust in God alone, saying, “He alone is my rock and my salvation.”

Our second reading continues from the first and introduces the theme of stewardship – that is the care of things in trust by a trustworthy person. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, the stewardship of God—the God who provides like a father and a mother who never forgets—is imitated by the apostles Paul and Apollos. They are, Paul says, “stewards of the mysteries of God.” The overarching point here is that if we trust in God, then we will act in ways that God would approve of and we would not need to worry.

In thinking about today’s Gospel and the issues of stewardship and trust, the irony was not lost on me that these readings takes place just so soon after our nation’s Budget Speech. Minister Gordhan quoted Pope Francis when he said, “Re-forming the social structures which perpetuate poverty and the exclusion of the poor first requires a conversion of mind and heart”. These social structures are clearly ones that were setup and served by the followers of Mammon. The Pope here is talking about choosing God, and that in doing so the practical consequences are not just in a personal choice, but in public and political choices as well.

I think anyone who has wittingly or unwittingly found themselves serving Mammon always needs a conversion of mind and heart. But it struck me that in Gordhan's Budget speech – and arguably he is one of the more trusted politicians of the moment – the 'transformation' he spoke of, sounded like it had a more theological than political tone. In fact, I was not alone in being struck by how many themes in the Budget Speech seemed to echo Catholic Social Teaching: Several of my Jesuit brothers remarked this week on how he spoke about the option for the poor, solidarity, human dignity, the call to community, responsibility and accountability, and trust. Fr Russell has more to say about this in our bulletin today.

But isn't it the case that the reason Mr Gordhan enjoys such trust from the people is precisely because he has not allowed himself to be enslaved by Mammon. He is surely not alone – but sadly, there are many who are slaves to Mammon and who have embraced corruption rather than stewardship. But Jesus warns us today to not follow in those footsteps, but to follow a righteous path and instead, and always, embrace God.

We have heard this morning about Jesus's challenge to us to trust in God. To trust – and not to worry. But living totally without worry sounds, to many people, as impossible as living totally without breathing. Some people are so used to worrying that if they haven't got anything to worry about they worry that they've forgotten something.

But when Jesus tells us not to worry about what to eat, or drink, or wear, he doesn't mean that these things don't matter. He doesn't mean that we should be fasting all the time or wearing rags. No. Jesus was inviting his followers to feast with him, and when he died the soldiers so admired his tunic that they threw dice for it rather than tearing it up. His point was more about priorities. If we put the world or mammon first, everything we work for will eventually decay, spoil or go to ruin. But when we put God first, we naturally develop an 'attitude of gratitude' in which we see everything as a gift from God. We are able to continuously discover how generous God is to us, day after day. God is the one who will never disappoint, if only we have eyes to see the gifts he gives us – beginning with life and with one another.

When we trust in God it does not mean that we must be idle and leave everything up to Him. Jesus did not mean for his hearer's to not plant seeds and reap harvests, or in any way to quit our work. But it was the motivation for that work he was concerned with. I think he meant that we should do these things with joy and gratitude, because God, our father, is the creator of all and wants to feed and clothe us. God is not a tyrant who is out to get us and make life difficult for us. Of course, we do live in a world filled with anxiety, and it's all too easy to let some of it rub off on us – and in South Africa we perhaps have more cause to worry than most. But in today's reading the underlying principles of the whole Sermon on the Mount come together in a huge but exhilarating challenge. Prioritise God – not just for an hour on Sunday – but in our every day lives. For God's kingdom, and the way of life that goes with it; the 'righteousness', or covenant behavior of stewardship, the way of life that marks out God's people; these are the things we should aim at to bring about God's Kingdom here on Earth. If we do that, then we'll find that food, drink and clothing look after themselves. Then we will not need to be worried – because our focus will be on God who created us and loved us, in our entirety.

But you might be asking yourselves – it's all very well knowing that we should choose God over Mammon – but how can we prioritise God? This is a matter of discernment, and the Ignatian tradition we try to operate out of at Holy Trinity has some trusted answers. The prayer of the Examen offers five steps to help us see what God is asking of us: we begin by giving thanks to God for what he has already blessed us with, we then ask for his light so that we can see things from his perspective, and then we notice where we have grown in consolation or experienced any increase in faith, hope and love, or it's opposite, desolation, where we have experienced a decrease in faith, hope and love. For those times of desolation we ask God for three gifts: to be sorry, for forgiveness, and gratitude for being forgiven, and finally we ask God for the strength to make good choices in the time ahead. This method of prayer – which we can all do – is a good way of helping us always recognize and choose what God is wanting for us. If we are able to reflect on our lives and bring our worries and fears to God and ask him to help us choose, then all our choices will be influenced by God, rather than any attachment or inordinate desire to mammon, because we trust that God will never hurt us – he is that good Father, who cares for his children, like he cares for all of his creation.

Let us pray this morning that we can tell God our worries,

Let us pray today that we can trust God.

Let us pray today that we might all be able to transform, and turn back towards God – a God who loved us into being, and never abandons us.

Amen.

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