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A homily for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, September 23, 2018 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** B

First Reading: Wisdom of Solomon 2:12, 17–20

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 54:3–8 | **Response:** Psalm 54:6b

Second Reading: James 3:16–4

Gospel Acclamation: 2 Thessalonians 2:14

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:30–37

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

Good morning everyone. It's good to be here again with you all. Our readings offer three insights to us this morning. The first is that if we are serious about being Christians, we need to reverse our thinking; the second is that we should beware ambition; and the third is that we must be like the righteous person and strive to possess and live by the wisdom of God if we are to endure the suffering that is sure to follow and so find and bring about peace in ourselves and in our world.

In our Gospel this morning we see Jesus doing something he often does – turning things upside down. He is sharing with us one of the real radical novelties of Christian living. He is redefining what it means to be 'great'. According to Jesus, is not about accumulating honour, power or wealth – but rather about cultivating relationships of love and service that make men and women truly great. He proposes a radically different system of relationships that would threaten the more traditionally minded of his time, and our own. We do not have to go far, in fact sadly we can see it in our own church, how people who desire merely fame and fortune quite quickly exhibit other vices like greed, or pride or even worse! This

is an insight that Pope Francis shares with Jesus when he talks about the need for the Church to create a culture that is against all forms of abuse of power, conscience, and sexual abuse. Instead of the power relationship of the strong over the weak, Jesus says: “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.” This was a complete reversal of values for the Disciples. What is important is not power and success, public recognition and prestige, but loving service. This lesson is repeated often in the Gospels and always the model given of the true servant we are called to imitate is Jesus. The other image Jesus uses is that of a child – a person who had no rights or privileges in that time, who was truly powerless – and he says “whoever receives such a child in my name, receives not me but him who sent me.” That is, in receiving the powerless child, we receive the most powerful God, but only if we serve.

The second thing we hear about in the readings is a warning against unbridled ambition. We hear in our second reading that where ‘jealousy and ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice’. These are the sorts of vices that go against humility. Our 2nd reading instead invites us to realise that the source of our wars and conflicts are rooted in our inner passions. How easy is it for us to sometimes allow our jealousy and selfishness to displace the wisdom in our hearts that is a gift from God. When we do not feel the fruit of wisdom in our lives, that is, when we are not at peace with ourselves and with each other, it is often a sign that something is unsettled in our spiritual lives. At these times it is tempting to lash out and hurt other people – but instead we should look inside ourselves and find the disordered desires that are robbing us of the peace that is God’s desire for each one of us. Quite often, the disordered desire has to do with comparing what we have and who we are with others, almost always resulting in us becoming jealous. This jealousy can sometimes morph into an unhealthy ambition and especially a sense of entitlement and an ambition for consuming more at the expense of the least and most vulnerable in our Society. How much this situation is worsened when we elect into office people who are not wise, who are not at peace with themselves, who instead exhibit vices that are indicative of this lack of wisdom. They are then put in a position to make wars and conflicts that affect ever-greater numbers of people, all as an outworking of their own personal discontent. We should, all of us, strive to live wisely – but even more so,

should our leaders and those in power. Precisely for this reason Jesus' reversal of values is important as it keeps the wise from being corrupted by power, through the recognition that their power is wisely and properly a call to service. In the Gospel the disciples have completely misunderstood Jesus on this point. They were expecting a triumphant messiah who would give each of them authority – and probably it was an authority they secretly desired and ambitioned for – we might call it clericalism. Jesus would be the ruler and they would be his deputies! What else can explain their reaction that while Jesus was trying to tell them that he would suffer, as would those who follow him, they were arguing among themselves about “which of them would be the greatest.”

They were ambitioning and desiring position, power and status and did not hear Jesus' lesson to them, and the lesson in the first and second reading that the righteous persons should possess, that is, they should recognize and cultivate the wisdom from God and so bear the fruits that would bring authentic peace as St James' letter says so well. But that, as the first reading dramatically paints, the righteous are in a world where the wicked are against them, and therefore necessarily there will be suffering and pain in the process of ensuring justice, because the wicked are plotting against them. Jesus is trying to tell his disciples he came to suffer in order to save the world. So too must we suffer if we are to overcome the wickedness in our world.

Today I'd like to briefly make special mention and offer thanks to our Catechists as we celebrate Catechetical Sunday. They are the ones in our Church here in Braamfontein who truly receive the children and teach them about Jesus. I hope they reinforce the lessons that have already begun with their parents of how they should model love and the pursuit of peace more highly than personal ambition or jealousy. In some ways, our catechists do the wonderful work of helping our children grow out of their self-interest into selfless-service. They do this through preparing them for the Sacraments, through ensuring that they question their faith and so learn what it has to offer more deeply and they begin to develop the values necessary for Christian living; and they do it all in a way that shows how interested they are with each child's well-being. Quite often the Catechists need

help in doing this. They cannot do all this by themselves – so if there are any parents here who feel they could be called to help teach, I invite you to get in touch with Sr Joy through Kelsay at the office.

So let us ask ourselves today as we reflect on what we have heard in the readings, what is it that we ambition in our lives, what is it that we are jealous of? How do we strive to possess wisdom and righteousness in our own lives, in our own situations. How do we work towards peace? Let us echo the psalm as we ask God to save us and give thanks for the name of the Lord, a name 'I am' that is the covenant and promise of a faithful God to an all-too-often unfaithful people. St Ignatius often encouraged his friends to strive only for the greater glory of God. Let us return to God today and recommit ourselves to living as Jesus suggested, following Wisdom and not wickedness, bringing peace to all we meet.

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