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## A homily for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Date:** Sunday, August 4, 2019 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C

**First Reading:** Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21–23

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 90:3–6, 12–13 | **Response:** Psalm 95:8

**Second Reading:** Colossians 3:1–5, 9–11

**Gospel Acclamation:** Matthew 5:3

**Gospel Reading:** Luke 12:13–21

**Preached at:** the Jesuit Institute and the St Martin de Porres Catholic Church in Orlando West, Soweto **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Ecclesiastes is a book in the Bible that forms part of the wisdom tradition and is named after the assembly, the church ecclesia, to whom the preacher Qoheleth is speaking. A previous wisdom book, the Book of Proverbs, made an argument that hard work and careful planning leads to prosperity, but laziness leads to poverty. In Ecclesiastes we see a critique of this position through a reflection on the experience of the gathered assembly. An experience that we can see today is still with us: that the virtuous are not always rewarded; that the corrupt at times prosper at the expense of the good; that the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. This happens – so what is a wise person to make of this?

In our reading today we hear the word ‘vanity’, but its Hebrew root is closer in meaning to vapour. Indeed, in death, the righteous and the sinner both perish. Nothing is left of their lives – any profit, i.e., what is left, vapourises with them.

What then is important? In the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, only a relationship with God. Everything else is fleeting and uncertain, and therefore, unworthy to be given our whole attention.

This does not mean that we should not care about things or people – but I think it means making a distinction, in this case between having and being, and remembering the right order of things. This is wisdom in its purest sense: to know the true value and right order of things.

What are things we should be concerned with today? Certainly – any wise person today would agree, I think, that we should care for our common home, which might not be a legacy we created, but it is one we are destroying, and is certainly the only thing we would leave to those after us whom we might care for. All is vanity indeed, but even the vain have to live somewhere.

But aside from caring for our common home, the only other thing worth truly investing in is our relationships with God, with creation, and with each other. Very often these need some degree of reconciliation. If the preacher in Ecclesiastes was here this morning, I would bet he would recommend such reconciliation too.

And in this fleeting world, our Psalm is a prayer for wisdom. All of us have a tendency to want to control things, to create plans, and so order the world to our way of thinking. But we hear today that God's ways are not ours. In praying for wisdom, we are asking to see the world more in the way that God sees it. To surrender our temptation to control, and to accept the limitations in our lives and in our world. Only then will we truly learn the value of the gifts God has given us.

Our second reading tells us that if we have conformed our lives to Christ, to see the world as God sees it, then we will be new persons. We will not be divided by such things as race or nationality, but rather we will see in each other the only important thing worth seeing – that we each bear an image of God and can love and be loved. This is the wisdom of seeing things as God sees it, or as the 2nd reading says, to seek what is above. We will not be distracted by the things be-

low – the things beneath our dignity or unworthy of our attention – all those things that seek to divide and impugn our dignity. Our focus will be on what is valuable, God, who is the source of all wisdom, truth and beauty in our lives.

The second reading talks of the old and new self. Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that if we just think about the word ‘self’ for a minute, the world thinks that a person is rich if he or she collects treasures for themselves. But in the Christian understanding, a person who has a rich being renounces this “self” and thinks only about being in God. For Christians, God is the treasure. And we remember the verse in Matthew’s Gospel: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be” (Mt 6:21). If God is our treasure, then we must allow ourselves to be dominated by the thought that God’s endless wealth is found in his self-giving and self-emptying, that is, in the very opposite of the wish to have everything.

All the forms of the desire to have, which St Paul lists and which are, as Hans Urs von Balthasar notes, “merely various degenerative forms of yearning”, must now be “put to death” for the sake of being in Christ. This putting to death is in truth a birth: the “becoming of a new person”. In the course of this putting to death, all divisions that delimit the being of man (“slave” or “free”) fall away, while everything valuable about our specific being contributes to the ultimate fullness of Christ, in whom we can find all truth, goodness and beauty. In becoming this new self, we recognize our true freedom that is only found in Christ.

Our Gospel warns against being possessed by possessions. It tells the story of the rich man who was so wealthy he tried to build better barns to store his harvest. This is a person who is trying to plan, to ensure his future security – but God tells this person who desired certainty and control that no-one can be in control over the things that matter, life and death.

God gives us opportunity and blessing to be used wisely now in this moment, and not to be stashed away to acquire even greater power and wealth. Like Qoheleth before him, Jesus strongly emphasizes that the action of God in our

lives must be responded to in the present situation as God would wish us to act. True wealth is not about having goods and money that serve only this life, but is instead being a life with God that becomes everlasting life.

Jesus is not criticizing riches per se, but the values of those who are rich. Do they seek wisdom and remain free, or do they allow themselves to be captured by their possessions and their greed?

In this sense perhaps, we are being challenged to discern. That is, the act of prayerful decision making that seeks to find and clarify God's will. Discernment reveals the deepest desires of oneself which we believe are God's desires for us. This process can be individual, but it can also be corporate.

In South Africa we are coming to grips with the enormity of State Capture – a sad situation in which the greed of a few individuals led to the near destruction and downfall of our society.

What are our values? Do we stand with Christ? The Word who is truth, and is Wisdom? Do we seek the will of God in our lives and choose to do the wise thing, the good thing, the thing that brings beauty into the world? Or do we follow our own craven will and choose unwisely the selfish and fleeting thing that – as the Preacher in the 1st reading warned – is just vanity.

Today our readings ask us to take a deep hard look at how, and what, we consume? And to reckon the expense of that consumption, not only for ourselves, but for our friends and future family and our environment.

We can grow rich in the eyes of God by seeking to be more like him. Or we can grow rich in the eyes of the world, and find that in the end, we are consumed and left wanting, in every sense of the word.

In our gospel today we are confronted with the question about having or being. If we reflect on what we have, and how we are, we can all recognize that one needs to have a certain number of things in order to be living a good life, but our life can never be good if it is only lived in the pursuit of things.

It all depends on our perspective. If you do not believe in eternal life after death, then your perspective is shrunken and it might make sense to amass wealth in this life. But, as St Paul points out, for those of us who believe in Christ, we are awokened to the reality that there is life after death, that there is something greater to our existence and that we should do everything to build up wealth for ourselves that we can take with us. This is not to be found in possessions, but in forming a good character that will be judged worthy of such eternal life. This is why the search for wisdom is paramount, and the wise before us have recognized that this is a search, ultimately, for a person, Jesus Christ.

This past week we celebrated the Feast of St Ignatius. St Ignatius left us a wise lesson in the beginning of his Spiritual Exercises. He prayed that we might be indifferent and use things only insofar as they bring us closer to God. If we kept this indifference with regard to created things, he promised, then we would be free. And in recognizing our freedom we can only be grateful to God.

So we should not feel dejected today. By all means, let us consider what and how we consume, but we should also find reasons to praise God. Because in praising God, in being grateful for all the gifts and opportunities we have been given; even for finding God in our suffering and pain, we will realize that we are not alone, we are not abandoned, we have reason to hope, we have reason to love. Our faith will sustain us and we will feel blessed.

In these readings where we are asked to consider our consumption and our values, St Ignatius offers a prayer that recognizes the true value of what is valuable, our relationship with God.

It is a prayer called, in Latin, Suscipe, from the word 'receive', St Ignatius prays:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will,

All I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.

You can imagine that St Ignatius learnt the lesson of Qoheleth in our first reading today. Everything is yours, give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me, Ignatius says. For the once vain courtier, St Ignatius learnt the wise lesson of not hording possessions for himself, but instead learnt the wisdom of humility, and why he was especially insistent on remaining free in the face of created things, keeping always before one the will of God.

Let us pray today that we would be given the grace to give up our desire for control and instead desire only to do God's will.

Let us pray today for the grace to be able to discern God's will in our lives.

Let us pray today that we might be able to reconcile our relationships with God, with creation and with each other, so that we might build the good character and seek the true wisdom that God desires us to have.

And where we find ourselves enslaved to something, an addiction or any form of unfreedom in our lives – let us ask God to remove that, to send his grace to us, because in God all things are possible.

Let us pray for our common home, and that our leaders might take the difficult but wise decisions that are necessary to preserve, protect and defend it for future generations.

Let us pray that we would develop a sense of freedom that would allow us to reduce our consumption in the world, so that our leaders can make these all-important decisions.

And Let us always praise God and give thanks for his gift of wisdom which this weekend God asks us to search for with renewed strength and purpose.

Amen.

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