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A homily for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, September 1, 2019 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C

First Reading: Sirach 3:17–18, 20, 28–29

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 68:4–7, 10–11 | **Response:** Psalm 68:11b

Second Reading: Hebrews 12:18–19, 22–24a

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 11:29ab

Gospel Reading: Luke 14:1, 7–14

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

Pope Francis recently declared September 1 as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, as the Orthodox Church has done since 1989. You can read the full letter [here](#). According to Pope Francis, “The annual World Day of prayer for the Care of Creation offers to individual believers and to the community a precious opportunity to renew our personal participation in this vocation as custodians of creation, raising to God our thanks for the marvellous works that He has entrusted to our care, invoking his help for the protection of creation and his mercy for the sins committed against the world in which we live.” Good morning. Our readings today offer us a simple message about humility, wisdom and greatness. In our first reading Sirach warns us to conduct our affairs with humility. Whilst in the Gospel Jesus points out that those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

So what is humility really? It’s Latin root, *humus*, means ground or earth and perhaps for that reason people associate it with a lowering of oneself – or not believing one is greater than the other. But our Christian understanding is that it is

the virtue that engenders a radically truthful attitude, before oneself and before God. Being humble then, is not to ignore our talents, strengths or abilities, or even our weaknesses and very uniqueness – but rather to see them as gifts from God to be used in the furtherance of God’s will. Knowing what God wills for us is the perennial Christian question, and it is why – at least in an adult faith – grappling with one’s conscience and learning to make good decisions that consciously choose the better or best choice that one can is so important. The pride and arrogance as represented in the Gospel by claiming the best seats is representative of an attitude that is idolatrous. Idolatry is having a false image of God, and consequently results in a false image of ourselves. It is effectively a belief in something false or untrue. In this instance it ignores the fact that God is the Creator, and we are his beloved creatures, and instead we put ourselves in the higher place.

When we are truly humble we experience what is described in our 2nd reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. It says: “What you have come to is nothing known to the senses... You have come to God himself.” When we are true to ourselves, we encounter God’s truth in us. And in coming to God, one can know God’s love and God’s will.

Our Gospel offers two insights. The first insight from our Gospel involves our willingness to be in the last place. The second insight has to do with opening our hearts to those who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in the last place. The gospels teach us that the dignity of the human person transcends social categories and draws us to be open to all people, especially the less fortunate.

Very often we can judge how others behave and criticize their behaviour. This is another form of idolatry – of putting ourselves in the place of God who is our judge. In Jesus’ day, and perhaps in ours still too today, it was all too easy for the well-off and educated to imagine that they were superior in God’s sight to the poor. How often do we position ourselves ahead of others. Let us always remember that “there but by the grace of God go I”.

I said at the beginning that our readings contain a simple message, but as with all simple messages, they can hide something profound. In our Psalm this morning we prayed ‘In your goodness, O God, you prepared a home for the poor.’

I’d like to spend a little time reflecting on that home, a home that is currently being destroyed by the rich, and the role of humility that is required for us to once again care for it – for ourselves, and for those who lack the resources to do so. Because today, the Catholic Church celebrates the start of the Liturgical ‘Season of Creation’.

When Pope Francis released his landmark document *Laudato Si’* in 2015, he established this season within the Church’s calendar.

This season lasts from 1st September to the 4th October, the feast of St Francis of Assisi. It is a time, the Pope says, for us as Catholics to humbly acknowledge God as creator, and remind ourselves of our shared creaturehood and common home and our intertwined destiny.

This year’s theme is “The Web of Life: Biodiversity as God’s Blessing” and it strikes me that as the Amazon – one of the largest homes of biodiversity on our planets – is burning, it is a surely an important theme for us to reflect upon, and to admit our collective failure thus far in responding to the call to care for creation, and to care for our common home.

We know that what is happening in the Amazon and in the Congo Basin, (the two lungs of our planet) affects our weather, the availability of water in many regions of the planet, and the very air we breathe.

When we inform ourselves of the science, that is to say when we allow ourselves to encounter the truth of God’s creation, we can only but feel humbled and in awe. I’m sure that all of us have looked up into a starry night sky and felt that feeling of awe, and I hope, gratitude, to the Creator who would come and be incarnate with us, on this small blue dot in the universe, God came to be with us. Out of the emptiness of space, God created a home for us – and we have a duty to care for it.

As we consider the importance of humility today we can start this Season of Creation spiritually, by remembering how we must be humble before God, how we must have humility in our relationships with each other, and have humility to acknowledge God's gift of creation in all its beauty, goodness, diversity and complexity. Yes! God does provide and has provided – but we are called to co-operate in that provision and to preserve his gifts for our future generations.

Our Gospel warns us against competing for human respect and honour and reminds us of God's special love and care for the poor. Humility will help us not to put ourselves ahead of anyone or anything. It will help us to see our interconnectedness – and how we are all brothers and sisters, equally beloved children of God.

One of my colleagues at the Jesuit Institute wrote this week: "If I can begin to grasp God's love for creation and God's grief at its destruction, then choosing to care for the environment becomes the only thing I can do."

This caring can begin with us all finding the greatness within ourselves to change our behaviour, to listen to the wisdom of the prophets in our midst and to make the changes, big and small, that can help reverse this destruction.

But we must consider the causes of its destruction. In our Gospel this morning, Jesus warns against the arrogance of self-promotion and competition for wealth, social recognition and acceptance. It is these motivations, the Pope reminds us, that often drive the destructive patterns of production, consumerism, and a culture of waste that destroy our home.

At fault too, is the too commonly accepted definition of progress that implies an increasing ability to consume and sees humanity and our planet as mere resources that could be consumed for private gain, instead of being preserved and nurtured for public benefit. I think of the example of how we travel. We are seldom conscious of the carbon cost of that travel. We live in an age where we can travel distances more comfortably than ever before. Yet, high school physics teaches that all motion involves work, calculated by distance, time and speed. We are fooling ourselves if we try to subtract the work from travel, the cost from

our experience. It should cost us physically, because then we remain conscious that energy is being spent. Human progress, I think, involves learning the insights from today's Gospel. Of opening our hearts to those who find themselves in last place, and in remaining humble and therefore willing not to always take the first place. We would be better humans, in relation to each other, if we could progress that way.

Let's pray today that we might be more conscious of how we live and work in this world, and how our behaviour affects others.

One of the questions I'm sure the upcoming Synod of Bishops focusing on the Amazon, will discuss, is our flawed notion of 'progress' and 'development'. Our flawed understanding of these notions have led us, I believe, into this crisis. We need to think, rather, and see things as interconnected in this Web of life, a web that not only supports but also protects us. This web is threatened by the arrogance of a purely technocratic view of progress, but its antidote is found in today's reading, that we always need to have humility.

For without humility we are too easily unaware and insensitive to the complex interconnections that make up the Web of Life. We see only our own benefit, and not the consequences to the many other lifeforms – human and animal, indeed the entire habitat – that we know are affected. Serious unforeseen and unintended consequences, like the warming of the planet and subsequent destructive climate change, are the result of an inadequate humility before nature.

I said earlier that this Season of Creation ends with the celebration of St Francis of Assisi, and perhaps his spirituality is the destination we need to arrive at in order to truly appreciate creation properly. His contemplative spirituality was rooted in a humble openness and curiosity about all individual creatures. It sparked amazement, and a growth in consciousness that led one to gratitude.

Let's pray today that our consciousness might also grow to see our reality as God sees it; to be truthfully humble before God; to say 'Praise Be to God' as we celebrate the mystery of our common home. Let us pray that in appreciating its

current peril we will be given the grace to do what is necessary to save what God has freely given us, for it was not given for us alone, but to all of us, and their children's children too.

Amen.

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