



## 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time



**Date:** Sunday, September 3, 2023 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A

**First Reading:** Jeremiah 20:7–9

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 63:2–6, 8–9 | **Response:** Psalm 63:2b

**Second Reading:** Romans 12:1–2

**Gospel Acclamation:** Ephesians 1:17–18

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 16:21–27

**Preached at:** St David's Marist, Inanda in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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Good evening everyone,

First, please let me say what a pleasure it is has been to accompany the young men and young women on their retreat today.

We have considered the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and reflected on their own giftedness and call to be ministers in the Church, because we believe the Holy Spirit is active in all of our lives. God is giving us the grace, God is giving you the grace, to be a Christian, and for these young men and women, to take the step to be confirmed in the Catholic Church.

Our readings this evening speak of this commitment.

If we listen to the Psalm we heard how ‘my soul is thirsting for you, Lord’

Isn't that always the case? We realise that no number of material possessions can ever substitute for that relationship with God.

What the Church is asking these young men and women to do is to, in a way, stand up and be counted in the world as Catholics, to own their faith and to proclaim that they have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. That what they pray in the Creed – they truly do believe. But the Catholic Faith is not some fairy tale or philosophical idea. It is a personal relationship with a God who cares deeply for each one of us.

But knowing the Lord, comes with some consequences. It certainly did for Jeremiah, who in the first reading speaks honestly with God. The best kind of prayer is honest. Jeremiah says that God ‘duped him’. He becomes the prophet God wants him to be, but he admits, ‘I am the object of laughter. Everyone mocks me.’ He says “I will not mention him – the Lord”, I will speak his name no more. But then he says “it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.”

We can imagine that when someone is in love – that love cannot be secret. Lovers want to proclaim their love publicly. And that is what the Lord desires of each of us, really. To not be hypocrites, but to proclaim to our friends and family, with our whole mind and body, that we are Christians.

As we heard in the second reading, we are not called to conform, but to be allowed ourselves to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, so that we might discern what God’s will is – which is always good and pleasing and perfect.

Perfection can be a dangerous thing. None of us is perfect. I think what it means here is that we try our best. And God is happy with that. The founder of the Jesuits, St Ignatius Loyola, used to say that the good is the evil of the better, which is the evil of the best. What he meant is that we should always strive to do more, to do the better thing, and if we can, to do that one best thing with our lives. But it will always be different for each person because we are all different.

In our Gospel Jesus spoke of his suffering, and Peter, misunderstanding everything again, is told that he is not thinking like God thinks, but as humans do.

That is the key to this renewal, this transformation that each of us is always called to make more perfect.

How do we see as God sees? During the day I invited the young men and women to pray this prayer to the Holy Spirit. It goes like this:

Come, Holy Spirit, Fill us with the fire of your love. Amaze us. Astound us. Occupy our hearts. Drive out anything that is not of You. Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the face of the earth, This tired and hurting earth. Teach us to cherish it, care for it, Recognize your breath in it. Come, Holy Spirit, Fill us with the fire of your love. Open our eyes to see as you see, our hearts to love as you love. Teach us to listen, dialogue, and understand.

Breathe in us words that console and bring hope and actions that bring justice and renewal to the poor, outcast, young, old, and infirm. Teach us how to live in unity, as one family, with one accord, Empowered by the winds of your abundant love, and grateful for your gifts to us. Come, Holy Spirit, We are ready To let go of the status quo. We give you permission to Disturb us with the fire of your love.

One of the ways we can see as God sees, is to become aware of how God is active in the world. As Christians, we tell each other that we will know each other by the fruits of our work. Our faith cannot remain only in our heads. As Pope Francis often says, it needs to involve our heads, our hearts and our hands... all of us - - what we think, what we feel and what we do.

I'd like to invite you this evening to pray for your children who are making this commitment; that they will make it wholeheartedly. That they will be unafraid to live out the consequences of their decision. One of the ways you can help them is to share with them, perhaps, the times you have felt God's grace in your life; how you have felt confirmed in your own faith.

Grace is a wonderful gift from God. Perhaps we do not always understand it. Allow me to share this image with you. Imagine a boat that has oars and a sail. In the Christian life, we must always move forward. Progress can happen then in two ways. Firstly, we can cultivate good habits and live according to the virtues of our faith; those cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, and the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. By paying attention to being virtuous we can become good men and women. Through inculcating good habits, by being disciplined, we can use the virtues of chastity to overcome the sin of lust; of generosity to overcome greed; of temperance to overcome gluttony; of fraternity to overcome envy; of meekness to overcome anger; of humility to overcome pride and of diligence to overcome sloth. Each of these virtues can help us overcome a particular sin in our life. In asking for the grace of these virtues we can work hard at building our character and in a way, this is like an oarsman in a boat, who by their effort, succeeds in propelling the boat forward.

But there is a second way, one where instead of through our own efforts, we are receptive to gifts of God's grace that come unbidden. These are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and it is as if instead of us using our oars to row forward, we allow the wind, God's breath – which incidentally is another way the early church un-

derstood the Holy Spirit – to ease us forward, effortlessly. I find this image of rowing and allowing the wind in the sails to move us forward a helpful one when considering how grace works in our life. We still need to be disciplined, but we can admit that God’s grace is at work in our life. I hope that after today these young men and women will be better at noticing how God has been active in their life; and how God will never ask them to do anything without giving them the grace to do so. Allow me to close with another Ignatian prayer – I am a Jesuit after all:

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.

Let us pray together in thanksgiving for the love and the grace God is gifting us with today.

Amen.

Prayers:

1. I’d like to pray for the young men and women on this retreat, and for all those at St David’s and St Teresa’s, that they will grow in the awareness of God’s love for each of them. Lord hear us.
2. Let us also remember, especially, all those who perished in the fire in town this week. Let us pray for all those who tried to save them, and all those left behind after this tragedy. Lord hear us.
3. I’d like to ask you to pray for Pope Francis as he visits Mongolia. His example as Pope is as one who is always concerned with those on the peripheries, those minorities who might feel overlooked or forgotten, unloved or persecuted. Let us ask ourselves who are the people in our lives who are on the margins or outcast. Let us ask the Lord to give us the gifts we need to encounter them, and to share God’s love with them. Lord hear us.
4. Let us pray for each one of us here today. For the families who thirst to know God more – perhaps even those who need to know God but do not know it. Help us to say as Pope Francis did at Word Youth Day – that the Church is for everyone, todos, todos, todos. Help us create that church in

Johannesburg that will enlarge the space of our tent, as the theme of next month's Synod invites us to do. Help us make room for everyone and to welcome each other as Jesus showed us. Lord hear us.

5. For what else, for who else should we pray for?

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