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A homily for the Memorial of St Bernard, abbot and doctor of the Church

Date: Wednesday, August 20, 2025 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C

First Reading: Judges 9:6–15

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 21:2–7 | **Response:** Psalm 21:2a

Gospel Acclamation: Hebrews 4:12

Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1–16

Preached at: the Chapel of Richartz House in the Archdiocese of Harare, Zimbabwe.

Dear friends in Christ,

Have you ever watched someone climb over others just to get ahead—at work, in politics, even in the Church? There’s something painful about seeing people treat power like a prize, not a responsibility. Today’s readings help us confront that temptation in ourselves—and ask what kind of heart we bring to the work God gives us.

In the first reading from the Book of Judges, Abimelech wants to be king. His name means “My father is king,” even though his father Gideon had refused that title, saying, “The Lord will rule over you.” But Abimelech doesn’t wait for God. He takes the crown by killing seventy of his brothers—seizing power not by calling, but by force.

Only one brother escapes: Jotham. From a mountaintop, he tells a parable. The olive tree, the fig tree, the vine—all refuse kingship. They would rather go on serving. But the bramble—a dry, thorny plant—says yes. It offers shade it cannot

give, and threatens fire instead. Jotham's message is clear: when those called to serve step aside, those hungry for power take their place. And the result is not peace, but destruction.

We have heard echoes of this in our own country before. Too often, leadership is about gain, not service. Too often, the poor are overlooked, young people pushed aside, and truth silenced. But this is not only a political problem. This is a human problem. This is a heart problem. It touches us all—whenever we care more about being first than being faithful, more about recognition than relationship.

Psalm 21 gives us a different picture. The true king rejoices not in his own strength, but in God's. "You set a crown of pure gold on his head," it says—meaning, this is not a crown grabbed, but one given. Real leadership begins in trust. It's not about raising ourselves up, but letting God shape us in humility.

And in the Gospel, Jesus tells a story that upends how we think about fairness. A landowner hires workers at different times—some early, some late—but pays them all the same. Those who worked longest complain, "You have made them equal to us." But the landowner replies, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

This is hard for us. We often think in terms of earning. But the kingdom of God is not based on merit, but mercy. The question is not, "Did I do more?" but, "Did I trust more?" God's generosity is not limited by our sense of justice. And that's good news—especially for those of us who arrive late, who fall often, who need grace more than we'd like to admit.

Dear friends, the challenge to serve humbly and to embrace God's generosity is real. How do we find the strength to let go of comparison, to resist the urge for control, and to truly lead with love?

It is not by our own effort alone—but by the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

The Spirit, given to us in Baptism and Confirmation, pours the love of God into our hearts. That love is what makes holiness possible. It's what enables us to love God above all things, and our neighbour as ourselves. The Spirit gives us gifts—wisdom, courage, patience—and fruits like kindness, gentleness, and self-control. These are not just virtues to admire; they are tools for the work of the kingdom. They help us to build peace, speak truth, and serve others without fear.

When we are tempted to compare our path with others, or feel bitterness at someone else's blessing, the Spirit gently turns our eyes back to God. When we're tired of doing good, and it seems no one sees, the Spirit reminds us: God sees. When we want to give up, the Spirit gives strength. It is through the Holy Spirit that we become not just workers in the vineyard, but true friends of the Master.

Saint Bernard, whom we celebrate today, knew this well. He came from privilege but chose poverty. He could have sought power, but chose prayer. And through his deep love of Christ and openness to the Spirit, he became a true servant of the Church—not through control, but through charity. His life reminds us: holiness is about surrender, not showmanship.

So today, we might ask ourselves: where am I grasping instead of trusting? Where am I counting hours, when I should be counting graces? Where do I need to let the Holy Spirit lead me from envy to joy, from comparison to peace?

As you continue your day, take these questions to prayer:

- Where do I feel the temptation to control rather than serve?
- How can I welcome God's generosity without jealousy or resentment?
- In what part of my life do I need the Holy Spirit's help to bear fruit in love?

May the Spirit who strengthened Saint Bernard strengthen us also. May we receive grace with open hands, and serve with open hearts.

Amen.

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