

## 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 49:14-15
<i>Response</i>	Rest in God alone, my soul.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 62:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 4:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The word of God is living and effective; discerning reflections and thoughts of the heart.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 6:24-34

The Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through, and our study of, the famous Sermon on the Mount. This is the fifth Sunday where we've been looking at the sermon and now we turn to a topic in Jesus' sermon which is of perennial importance for everyone who lives in this world. And that is the question of money and anxiety about the future. I've always personally found this particular chapter of the Sermon on the Mount one of the most challenging of all of Jesus' teachings, but also the most consoling of all his teachings. So let's look at the Gospel reading today, which is from Matthew 6:24-34, and then we will try to unpack it and ask some questions about it. This is how the Gospel reads:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which

today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, `What shall we eat?' or `What shall we drink?' or `What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.<sup>1</sup>

So that is the end of the Gospel. What I want to do with this Gospel is to just break down a few of the key points here. Obviously Jesus is hitting on a major theme here of trust in divine providence, trusting in God's care — his care for his precious children. He's already given us the image in the Sermon on the Mount of God as our Father, so now he's trying to draw out the implications of that reality — to how we live our daily lives, and in particular, to what we do in our concern for the cares of the world: food, clothing, money and the future. These are the things that almost every human being, indeed every human being, has to think about and often finds oneself anxious about: money, food, drink, clothing and the future.

So what does Jesus have to tell us about this? Let's walk through the Gospel point by point. Number one. He begins first and foremost by giving us this very stark image of “no one being able to serve two masters.” The Greek language here is a little stronger than our English puts it. So when Jesus says “no one can serve two masters,” the Greek word there is *douleuō*, which literally means to be a slave to; and the Greek word for master, *kyrios*, literally means lord. It is the same word you will find elsewhere in the gospel for the Lord himself, the *kyrios*, like in Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy. So what Jesus is literally saying, to begin this section, is “no one can be a slave to two lords.” So in other words, you're either going to worship God as the Lord or you're going to worship mammon, which is an Aramaic word for money, wealth or possessions. You will either worship God as your lord or mammon as your lord, but you can't have two lords — just like a servant can't have two masters. And if he does find himself in the situation of

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

having two masters, he'll either love one and hate the other or cherish one and despise the other. Maybe you can imagine the situation for a modern-day equivalent of perhaps finding yourself in an office where you had two bosses rather than one. In other words, two final authorities that you had to answer to. It would obviously be a situation where you end up picking one over the other. It would not be a good thing. That is what Jesus is describing here. He is saying "sometimes people find themselves in a situation where they are trying to both worship God, and to serve him as their Lord and Master, and at the same time giving themselves over to the worship of money or to the worship of mammon, this Aramaic word for money or wealth that has a very negative connotation.

So in that context, Jesus then moves to the second point, in which he says "don't be anxious about your life." Now note this here, Jesus here is not making a suggestion, he's not just giving an invitation. Three times in this passage, he's going to give a command. He is commanding us "do not be anxious." It is an imperative, right, don't be anxious about your life. And then goes on to explain some examples there. So he says "don't be anxious about food, don't be anxious about drink and don't be anxious about clothing." So those are the basic examples he gives us. Now why does he pick those out? Well because — especially in the first century AD — in the agricultural society in which he lived, in which there was a lot of poverty, these were the basic necessities of life that you needed to live. You need drink, you need food and you need clothing in order to live. And in a situation where there was a lot of poverty, those things were often difficult to come by. So he's exhorting the audience here not to worry even about the most basic necessities of life. Well why, why shouldn't we be anxious about those? Jesus gives examples from the natural world. So the first example he gives is the "birds of the air." They don't have barns, they don't gather, but God feeds them, he takes care of them. And he says there, "aren't you worth more than many sparrows," aren't you more valuable than the birds of the air — the implied answer being of course. The birds are simply creatures, but he's already revealed to us that human beings are the children of God. God is our father, so it's irrational to believe that God won't provide for his children if he provides for the birds of the air that are of less value.

Same thing with the issue of clothing. He says "well look at the lilies, look at the beautiful flowers in the field." You can think about, for example, the flowers when

they bloom in the springtime, how beautiful a field of wildflowers is. Jesus says “I tell you, even Solomon in all of his glory and splendor wasn't arrayed like one of these, and yet these wildflowers, today they are beautifying the field but tomorrow they are going to be cut down and used for fire, just thrown into the oven to be burned. Aren't you more valuable than they?” And there he says something very interesting in that verse, “aren't you more valuable than they?” And then he says “O you of little faith.” Now that is really important. What he implies there and what he is revealing to us is that every time a person gives into anxiety, it's always a sign of a lack of trust in God. As hard of a truth as that may be to swallow, that is the reality. Anytime we give into anxiety and we let it overcome us, we really are manifesting a lack of *pistes* in the Greek, which is the word for both faith and trust — it is the same word in Greek. So when he says “O you of little faith,” he is also saying “O you of little trust.” In other words, you're showing that you don't really believe that God is your Father and you don't trust that he will take care of you, that your faith is very small.

So after he makes that challenge, he again commands us “so don't be anxious, going around asking what are we to eat, what are we to drink, what are we to wear?” He says “it's the Gentiles who seek after these things.” Now what does he mean by that? Well the word there for Gentiles is just a reference to the non-Israelites of the world, the pagan peoples of the world. In other words, even people who are without God, how do they live their lives? Well they live their lives seeking after the things of this world. He said “the Gentiles seek all these things and your Father knows that you need them, and you [meaning you, my disciples] have to be different. You have to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and then all these necessities of life shall be given to you as well.” So what does that mean to seek first the kingdom of God, because that seems to be the main thrust, the main point of all the examples Jesus is giving here? What does that mean? Does that mean that I don't even try to take care of my family, to acquire food and drink and clothing and shelter for my family by working for a living? Is that what it means?

If you look here at the history of the Church, the tradition of the Church is well represented by St. Augustine, who says that “what Jesus means when he says to ‘seek first the kingdom and all these other things shall be provided for you as well’ is this; it's that God knows that we need the necessities of life: food, clothing, that

kind of thing, but that in the acquisition of those things we should always seek first the kingdom.” In other words, we don’t seek those things for their own sake. We do it with an eternal end in mind. So what he's getting at here — this is so, so crucial — is that ultimately our service has to be to the Lord. We can't make the things of this world, the necessities of this world, whether it be money or food or clothing, we can't turn them into our masters so that we become slaves to them. Rather, those are all tools that build up our natural life for the sake of supernatural life, for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus goes on to make this clear when he says “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well.” In other words, God's going to provide for all your necessities. That doesn't mean he is going to make you rich, this is not a health and wealth gospel. Note that, this is important, when he says “all these things shall be yours as well,” he doesn't mention fast cars and big boats and lavish houses. What is he talking about? Food, clothing, drink and shelter, the necessities of life. So God will provide for our necessities, but we need to order our acquisition of these possessions and money and food and clothing, ultimately to their end which is God himself and the kingdom of God, so that we are always living with our ultimate end in mind.

And that's why if we do that, it leads us to the next point, because Jesus says “therefore [third command], don't be anxious.” And in this case, not just about the material possessions of this world, but about tomorrow. In other words, about the future. “For tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the days own trouble [literally, the days own evil, *kakia*, badness] be enough for that day.” I love this line of Jesus where he talks about anxiety about the future for two reasons. First, it's just very realistic. Jesus is not looking at the world through rose-colored glasses. He is not an idealist or an optimist. He is very clear, tomorrow will have evil, it will have trouble, you are not going to make it through this valley of tears without suffering, and every day will have some kind of suffering in it. Someone somewhere is going to be suffering/dying tomorrow. You will experience some kind of suffering tomorrow. So let tomorrow's evil be enough for today, but for now you should live in the present moment, because that's where God is. God is not in the past, he is not in the future, he's in the present moment. So he is calling us here to live in the present moment and then to let tomorrow be something that God will take care of. So it is just another act of trust in his divine providence. And there is a real wisdom here because think about it, what do most people worry

the most about? Their possessions, the acquisition of wealth, and the future. The future can really be a scary prospect for us. So when Jesus says both realistically, yes, there will be trouble tomorrow, but also emphatically, don't worry about that, don't be anxious about it, he's calling us here to a radical trust in God's fatherhood, in God's divine providence, that we see displayed in the natural world. The birds of the air, the plants, they don't have anxiety, they live in the world trusting, in a sense, that God will provide, and he does.

Now if you have any doubts that that's the theme of the Gospel for this week, you can actually go back to the book of Isaiah. The Old Testament text for this week is from Isaiah 49. Isaiah is prophesying here at a time of great distress in Israel, when it appears that God has completely abandoned his people. Foreign powers are overtaking them, there is the threat of destruction, and in the midst of all of that, what appears to be a complete abandonment of Israel by God, this is what the prophet says to them:

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me."

And then God responds here in the next verse.

"Can a woman forget her suckling child,  
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.

So notice what he is saying here. Even when it looks as if God has abandoned his people, when it looks like God has forsaken them, the reality is not only could he no more forget them than a woman forget her suckling child or a woman forget the child in her womb, even if those were to forget, the woman forgot the child in her womb, God would never forget his people. He would never abandon his people. He would never forsake them. So here, once again, you see very clearly the theme of this Sunday, for the Eight Sunday in Ordinary Time, is trust in divine providence.

And that is the theme for the Psalm as well. So the Psalm here is Psalm 62. I am not going to read the psalm in this case, I am just going to point out the main theme, which is “rest in God alone, my soul.” So the Psalm takes up this idea of trust in divine providence and uses the imagery of resting in God alone, or describing God alone as being our rock or our salvation or our fortress. Which again, in a first century Jewish context, you have to think about it in these terms, a fortress — like the walls of a city — were its primary means of protection. You didn’t have police forces that would go around, the state police and the federal police and then the local police to take care of you and protect you. What each town, each city, had would be a wall. It was built up as a fortress so that invaders could not come in and just wipe your city out in one night while you were all sleeping. So when you say God is my rock, God is my fortress, what you are saying is He's my principal form of protection and he's the one above all in whom I trust, not just sometimes, but at all times; so this radical reliance on God to provide and to care for us.

Okay, so that's the Old Testament reading and that is the Psalm. How does that go with the Gospel? Well just think about it for a second. Trust in divine providence and worshipping money or being anxious about money, what's the relationship between those two things? Well once you take God out of the picture, what's the primary thing that people tend to place their trust in in place of God? It's money, it is money, because money in this world has the allure of promising absolute security. So in other words, if I can just get enough money, I'll never have to worry about what I eat again. If I can just get enough money, I'll never have to worry about what I will wear again or where I will live again. I can have insurance right — that is our favorite thing in the modern world. I am going to buy insurance on my home. I am going to buy insurance on my car. They even have food insurance now, and pet insurance and every kind of insurance. Why? Well because we're afraid. We are afraid of our own fragility, we are afraid of our own mortality and we live often under the delusion that if I can just get enough money I can ensure that all will be well and nothing will happen to me. And as anyone knows, if you live long enough, that's just not the case. It doesn't matter how much money, how many possessions you have, you can come down with a case of cancer like that, you can get sick, you can get into an accident, you could lose it all in a moment. And so what Jesus is trying to do for his first century audience, as well as for us today, is help us to recognize that one of the greatest temptations of life for those of

us who fail to trust in God, is to give the trust and the love and the worship that we're supposed to give to him, to shift that and begin to give it to possessions and to money.

That's why I think here that there are two passages from the New Testament that I want to highlight as parallels. They are not in the lectionary for this week, but I still think they're relevant because they help us hone in on exactly what Jesus is getting at, trying to put his words in their broader context. The first one is 1 Timothy 6:10, and it says this:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

Sometimes people say that money is the root of all evils. That is not actually what the New Testament says. It says “the love of money is the root of all evils.” Why? Because it is through this “craving...[that] some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” In other words, once a person takes their love and shifts it away from God and begins to give it to things, what does that signify? It signifies that they lost faith, they have lost their trust in God. And they begin not only to just seek to acquire money, but they seek to worship it. They become its slave. It's a kind of idolatry in other words, and we find the same teaching in the Letter to the Hebrews. The other passage here is from Hebrews 13:5, which says:

[Keep] your life free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for He Himself has said, I will never leave you or forsake you.

So again, what Hebrews, Timothy and Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, all these teachings go together to show us, is that when we give ourselves over to the love of money, by necessity, we are abandoning the love of God, we are abandoning the worship of God and, above all, we are abandoning trust in the Lord. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church and in the tradition of the Church, this has always been seen as a kind of idolatry. It is really important to think about it this way. The first commandment out of the ten is “I'm the Lord your God... you should have no other gods before Me.” I think most of us think “okay, check, got that one. First commandment, no problem. I haven't visited any pagan temples lately, I'm not committing idolatry. But the reality is, that if you look at Jesus’



words in the Sermon on the Mount here, “no one can serve two masters...you can't serve God and Mammon,” there's a real sense in which the love of money or the service of money, in other words making our lives entirely about acquiring more and more and more and more money, in other words becoming a slave to money — which if you look at our society and our culture, there are a lot of people who devote their entire lives just to making a dollar, more and more money, and it is never enough — Jesus is saying to us here, what he is revealing and what the Catechism says in paragraph 2113 is that that kind of service to money, that kind of worship of money, that kind of giving ourselves over to where, rather than seeking first the kingdom, we seek first the dollar, that's a kind of idolatry. It is a form of idolatry, where we turn money and possessions, or Mammon as Jesus gives it — almost personifying it here — into our God and we make mammon and money into the one that we place our trust in. So you can just replace all those verses from the Psalm, “money alone is my rock...money is my fortress...money is my salvation...I will put my trust in my possessions...I'll put my trust in my insurance or my 401(k) or whatever it is.”

So we have to be careful about that. On the one hand, God knows we need certain things, he knows we have necessities in this life. We are not angels, we are human beings. On the other hand, he also calls us to a radical trust in divine providence. God does not abandon us. If he doesn't abandon the lilies of the field or the birds of the air, then how much more is it true that when it comes to us his children, every single moment of our lives, he upholds us, he sustains us, takes care of us. If God were to forget us for a single moment, we would cease to exist. The very fact that you exist right now in this present moment is proof that God your Father loves you, that he is providing for you, he is giving you the gift of existence and he's watching over you and caring for you. So if we really believe the Sermon on the Mount and what Jesus is telling us in this week's Gospel, then there really isn't any reason for us to be anxious, to give ourselves over to anxiety. Instead, what we need to give ourselves over to, is seeking first the kingdom of God and seeking first his righteousness. In other words, the path of holiness, trying to discover what is his will for my life and how can I do it through his grace. And when we do that, we will find is, instead of being a slave to possessions, a slave to money or a slave to fear and anxiety, we will begin to live in what Paul calls the “glorious freedom of the children of God.” The freedom of knowing that we have a heavenly Father, the one who made the heavens and the earth, who is always watching over us, who

is always caring for us, even in those moments when it seems we are alone, he is there with us, he has not forsaken us and he will not forget us.