

## Homily notes for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 12<sup>th</sup> February 2017

(The weekend following St Josephine Bakhita's day on 8<sup>th</sup> February)

### READINGS:

**1st Reading:** Ecclesiasticus 15:15 – 20.

**Responsorial Psalm:** 118:1-2, 4-5, 17 – 18, 33 – 34 (Response - Happy are they who follow the law of the Lord.)

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading:** 1 Corinthians 2:6-10

**Gospel:** Matthew 5:17 – 37. (There is a recommended shorter version in lectionary)

### BACKGROUND STORY:

*Bakhita was born in Olgossa in the Western Sudanese region of Darfur. At the age of seven she was kidnapped and sold into slavery where she was given the name Bakhita, which means fortunate. As a young girl, she was resold several times, until finally in 1883 she was sold to Callisto Legnani, Italian consul in Khartoum, Sudan. Two years later, he took his slave Bakhita to Italy and gave her to his friend Augusto Michieli. Bakhita became babysitter to Mimmina Michieli, whom she accompanied to Venice's Institute of the Catechumens, run by the Canossian Sisters. While Mimmina was being instructed, Bakhita felt drawn to the Catholic Church. She was baptized and confirmed in 1890, taking the name Josephine. When the Michielis returned from Africa and wanted to take Mimmina and Josephine back with them, Josephine refused to go. During the ensuing court case, the Canossian Sisters and the patriarch of Venice intervened on Josephine's behalf. The judge concluded that since slavery was illegal in Italy, she had actually been free since 1885. Josephine entered the Institute of St. Magdalene of Canossa in 1893 and made her profession three years later. She spent the rest of her life living in her religious community engaged in cooking, sewing and kindly welcoming visitors at the door. She soon became well loved by the children attending the sisters' school and the local citizens. She once said, "Be good, love the Lord, pray for those who do not know God, for what a great grace it is to know God!" Josephine Bakhita died in 1947 and was canonized in 2000. Josephine Bakhita is honoured as the patron saint of Sudan and of all people who have been and are still being trafficked into slavery.*

## HOMILY SUGGESTION:

In today's psalm, we hear the overwhelming love that the Hebrew people had for the Law. *Open my eyes that I may consider the wonders of your law.*

*Teach me the demands of your statutes and I will keep them to the end.*

This can feel strange to Australian people today. We know law is important, but we do not enthuse about it in the same way. For the people of the Old Testament, God's Law marked them as different from all other people – they knew they were chosen, loved, cared for, and rescued from slavery by God. And for them, keeping God's Law was their side of this precious Covenant.

It can be helpful for us to remember Jesus' response when he was asked what was most important about the Law: he focused on just two things – the need to love God and to love each other. Like Jesus' questioner we can ask 'How?'

In the First Reading from Ecclesiasticus the wisdom writer reminds us that we have choices. If we wish we can *behave faithfully, we can choose between fire and water, between life and death.* We know the power of our choices: we can choose to forgive instead of holding onto hurts and disappointments, to be honest even when others around us are not honest, we can choose to do something small or large to make the world a better place; we can choose to put aside 10 or 20 minutes for quiet meditation instead of rushing on to the next thing in our busy lives. This happens every day for each of us. Choices are put before us, and we know what Jesus' law of love asks of us, and we pray for the wisdom to make the best choices.

Today we are invited to remember St Josephine Bakhita, the patron saint of people who are trafficked and in slavery. Occasionally we hear or read news reports of women, children and men enslaved in various parts of the world, including in Australia. They may be physically imprisoned, held captive by debts or threats to their lives and to the lives of those they love. There are millions of people even today who are treated as slaves. As people of faith it might help to look at the life of the woman whom Pope Francis has named as the patron saint of people who are trafficked or in slavery.

St. Josephine Bakhita was born in the Western Sudanese region of Darfur. At the age of seven she was kidnapped and sold into slavery where she was given the name Bakhita, which means fortunate. As a young girl, she was resold several times, until finally in 1883 she was sold to the Italian consul in Sudan. Two years later, he took his slave Bakhita to Italy and gave her to his friend who needed a babysitter. One of her tasks was to accompany her charge to Venice's Institute of the Catechumens, run by the Canossian Sisters. Bakhita felt drawn to the Catholic Church and she was baptized and confirmed in 1890, taking the name Josephine. When the family wanted to take Josephine back to Africa with them, Josephine refused to go. During the ensuing court case, the Canossian Sisters and the patriarch of Venice intervened on Josephine's behalf. The judge concluded that since slavery was illegal in Italy, she had actually been free since 1885. Josephine entered the Institute of St. Magdalene of Canossa in 1893 and made her profession three years later. She spent the rest of her life living in her religious community engaged in cooking, sewing and kindly welcoming visitors at the door. She soon became well loved by the children attending the sisters' school and the local citizens. She once said, "Be good, love the Lord, pray for those who do not know

God, for what a great grace it is to know God!" Josephine Bakhita died in 1947 and was canonized in 2000.

It is helpful to hold this story in mind as we listen to the Readings today. Bakhita's courage and hope survived a life of oppression, lack of respect and lack of personal freedom. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians reminds us that we have the hidden wisdom of God to guide us, a wisdom far from the selfishness and greed around us and within us. We can have confidence that God continues to prepare unimaginable goodness and beauty for us. Even slaves know this of God, the assurance that God wants their freedom, as the African American spirituals declare.

In the Gospel Jesus challenges us to have a deeper virtue than the scribes or Pharisees. The Greek word used for 'virtue' means fairness or justice. Jesus calls us to a depth of doing the right thing by anyone oppressed or discriminated against, anyone enslaved in any way or any place. God calls us to act out of an integrity and honesty that recognises justice for all human beings. God inspires our hearts to feel deeply and to take action to seek justice for those who are denied freedom, the millions of trafficked and exploited people around the world today. When we feel such a response, we might remember as well the people who work to educate the rest of us, the people who find, rescue and support those who enslaved.

We always have choices in our lives. We are called to follow Jesus' law of love, both in our everyday lives and by responding to the needs of the most abandoned people around the world – to the extent that we can. In doing so we can live out our covenant with our God just as the Hebrew people did; as St Teresa of Avila reminded us we are created to be the hands, the feet, the eyes, and the heart of God for our world.

Homily notes by Bernadette Keating pbvm in conjunction with Claire Griffin csb