

Sermon notes for Trinity 15

“No man can serve two masters”

The argument that we cannot successfully give full allegiance to both God and Mammon (whatever that means) at the same time and for the same purposes is self-evident. But notoriously the effort is made to wriggle round it. I hope nobody is so foolish as to imagine that an hour on Sunday with or without a minimum of daily prayer will leave us free for the rest of the time. And I hope nobody imagines that only a limited group of direct commandments from our Lord bind us in our daily lives, so that the rest of our activity is free from the question of what God wants. No, it is quite obviously our Lord's teaching that giving ourselves to his Father, or following Him, or walking in the Spirit (however it may be put) all come to the same, namely a total commitment.

It is always the case that God “wears the trousers”. The alternative choice is not equal. Some modern translators rendered Mammon by “money”. This was not completely wrong, for indeed money is a danger. Worldly success may be measured by income; there is a savage warning in the Apocalypse that a wealthy church is not successful in the sight of God (3.14-19). But Mammon is something more than money – he (not it) is a false God, an idol put in place of our proper devotion. Rightly the hymn puts this aspiration upon us:

The dearest idol I have known
Whate'er that idol be
Help me to tear it from thy throne
And worship only thee.

There can of course be other idols than money. Examine your lives for this fault.

Now so far the Gospel is obvious enough, if demanding. But Christ does not stop there. The Authorised Version as found in the Prayer Book has him repeatedly say “Take no thought”. That is not an accurate translation. The Revised Version as found in 1928 renders “be not anxious”. I think this is much nearer the Greek and fully consistent with the pedantic policy of that translation. Even Young's concordance (a safe enough source for a conservative interpretation) though it is based on the Authorised Version glosses “to be over anxious, very careful”. (We do not of course know in what language Christ was speaking, let alone what word he originally used, let alone how it would be understood by the original hearers.) There is no alternative to bible study, with an emphasis on the study. The obvious meaning in the obvious translation is not always right.

“Be not anxious” is advice which we can I suppose bear. Worldly wisdom would indeed suggest that constant fretting is not a good way of living; so much the more for Christians. If we believe we can rely on God (which is the underlying meaning of “Amen”) for salvation, how can we not rely on him for the mundane problems of this life? “Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things”. Certainly when faced with a decision or a problem pray to God for his wisdom and help as appropriate; and then act as having received it. We are not promised an easy life; we are promised enough help to cope.

Since we are in the situation we are in, then certainly our heavenly Father knows we are concerned about the virus. We may be over-anxious. We may be over-casual. However much at risk we are, we know others are at greater risk of the virus; and then there is the economic risk. Certainly, here is a concern (for others as well as ourselves) we should bring to God in prayer; not because he does not know, nor because he needs our prompting to care. He will see us through. Anxiety, which is one stop before panic, will not help. Blaming others (even if they richly deserve it) will not help. We are not told to take no thought and avoid all precautions. There is sufficient evidence that those churches which presumed on God in this way have not escaped the virus. Worldly wisdom about precautions is not a serving of Mammon.