

Sermon Notes for Trinity XV

"No man can serve two masters" (Gospel)

This is the kind of simple statement which tempts us to wriggle. And the means are to hand. Semitic languages in general tend to favour simple extreme statements; one has to bring several such statements together (for instance "render under Caesar" and "make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness") and then to try to balance them. And so, with the best of scholarship, the Lord's challenge can be eviscerated. But should it be so easy?

We must not evade facts. We are, by the standards of most people in the world, quite rich. The fact that we know of people far richer does not alter this. Now "Mammon" is not money (and if the Lord had wanted to speak simply of money he had the means, so those translators who render Mammon by "money" in this passage are misrepresenting the original). But there are unambiguous warnings from the Lord of the difficulties the rich, or at least (wriggling began early!) those who trust in their riches, will have in face of God. The camel does not easily pass the eye of the needle, and any interpretation which suggests it does is false. These passages do concern us.

Mammon is not money simply (and our riches are not notes and coin) but money as a false god. Yes, but this is too easy an escape. We are not (especially in these days when fiat money seems unreliable) going to worship the currency in accordance with the "modern decalogue". But we are prone to organise our affairs, to "be anxious for the morrow". Again there is the temptation to translate this as if it were being over-anxious, so that ordinary concern were left legitimate. But that is not how our Lord lived, so I doubt that is what he meant.

Enough of me. Here is Wesley on the passage. "We cannot serve God unless we believe in him. This is the only true foundation of serving him. Therefore, believing in God, as "reconciling the world to himself through Christ Jesus," the believing in him, as a loving, pardoning God, is the first great branch of his service. And thus to believe in God implies, to trust in him as our strength, without whom we can do nothing, who every moment endues us with power from on high. It implies, to trust in God as our happiness; as the centre of spirits; the only rest of our souls; the only good who is adequate to all our capacities, and sufficient to satisfy all the desires he hath given us. It implies, to trust in God as our end; to have an eye to him in all things; to use all things only as means of enjoying him. and to refer all things to him in Christ Jesus.

"Thus to believe, is the First thing we are to understand by serving God. The Second is, to love him. Now to love God in the manner the Scripture describes, in the manner God himself requires of us, and by requiring engages to work in us, - is to love him as the ONE GOD; that is, with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength; - in a word, to have such a possession of God as makes us always happy. A Third thing we are to understand by serving God is to resemble or imitate him in the spirit of our minds. Now God is love: Therefore, they who resemble him in the spirit of their minds are transformed into the same image. One thing more we are to understand by serving God, and that is, the obeying him; the glorifying him with our bodies, as well as with our spirits; the keeping his outward commandments; the zealously doing whatever he hath enjoined; the carefully avoiding whatever he hath forbidden; the performing all the ordinary actions of life with a single eye and a pure heart, offering them all in holy, fervent love, as sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ."

Even Wesley is, I think, somewhat guilty of wriggling in his further exposition, of allowing more concern about our human affairs than the Lord did. But this much he has understood, that trying to adjust the balance is a fundamental mistake. Give yourself wholly to God, and then you might see clearly to order your human affairs. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you", we read. "Before ye give place to any other thought or care, let it be your concern that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ may reign in your heart, may manifest himself in your soul, and dwell and rule there; that he may cast down every high thing which exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. Let God have the sole dominion over you: Let him reign without a rival: Let him possess all your heart, and rule alone."