

### Lent 3 24-02-08

*“no covetous man, which is an idolater”* (the epistle).

You may remember the Victorian satirical version of the Ten Commandments:

“No golden images may be  
Worshipped, except the currency.”

Lent is a proper time to reflect on our Christian duties. Many of them are indeed too obvious to require a sermon, yet not all our duties are straightforward, and this link between covetousness and idolatry merits exposition.

It was a routine assumption in contemporary Judaism to link fornication, covetousness and idolatry, as a summary of what was wrong with the Gentiles. So at one level St. Paul has allowed the drafter of his letter to apply a platitude. But that does not make it wrong! We Christians are in danger from the world.

Not that we will commit fornication ourselves. I warn you not against the act, but against “adultery in the heart”, as Christ did (Matt. 5.28). The coarsening effect of the secular world, not least in advertising, is a problem we have to face. What is the link to idolatry? Is it not that we are “temples of the Holy Ghost” (see 1Cor. 15-9) and so any behaviour, whether in act or thought, inconsistent with that will be a defilement of the temple and a rejection of God.

Covetousness is a different sort of problem. There is a doubt whether this in the Ten Commandments was an attitude or an action, a more subtle form of stealing. Certainly St. Paul treats it as an attitude in Romans 7.7. Doubtless “keeping up with the Joneses” is the sin of covetousness. The problem is that we may well choose to acquire something, perhaps a new car, of a kind which we have seen that a neighbour (for example a colleague at work) has, because we think we do need one ourselves, not for vanity but for practical use. Have we done wrong merely to take this hint? Naturally, we may be deceiving ourselves; we ought always to question how great the need is, but it may be there,

Again, we must be aware of the coarsening effects of the secular world, which in the form of advertising effectively says “thou shalt covet”. Worse, in these strange modern times, it goes on to warn that if you stop spending you will add to economic decline and put people out of work both here and in the Third World. We may be under pressure in the next few months both to save and to spend, and both for the sake of others as well as ourselves.

Now the world does tend to be wise in its own affairs. There was a brutal exposition of this problem some three centuries ago (Mandeville's fable of the “Grumbling Hive”) which argued that if the country ever seriously “got religion” its prosperity would be at an end because, if people ceased to covet luxuries, there simply would not be enough honest work to go round. We don't have the problem in that form, because we do not live in a society which is mainly (hypocritically) Christian. If we Christians became more or less covetous, the effect on the economy would be trivial. I do nevertheless have doubts about that superficially attractive slogan “live simply, that others may simply live”. For if enough of us do, they might simply starve. I do not have easy answers.

Yet perhaps the link between covetousness and idolatry is part of the answer. We will not give the glory which is God's to any rival (that is the core of the sin of idolatry, of which graven images is merely an instance). We listen to our Lord's instruction to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's”, so we will participate in the life of the world. St. Paul gave no encouragement to a total detachment. He laughs at those who think they can “go out of this world” (1Cor. 5.10). But “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”(Matt. 6.21), and “ye cannot serve God and Mammon”(Matt 6.24). We are called to a difficult balancing act. We have given our lives to God, and because he has placed us in this world, we must exercise those lives under the terms which he has set: in the world, yet called to serve him alone. Because we are to “love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength”, therefore we must also “love our neighbour as ourselves” - and participating in the global economy is part of that duty.

Yes, covetousness is not an easy topic. We are not *all* called to sell everything (or who would buy it) and follow Christ in poverty. (*Some* are so called, and blessed are they if they follow that calling. But this is not a *general* call.) But we are all called to pray “give us this day our daily bread” - as much as we need, and as we need it, no more. We are also all called not to “be anxious”(Matt. 6.25). A Christian will therefore so pray, and will receive the satisfaction of his reasonable needs as a blessing from God, for which thanks should be returned. He (and it is obvious that I include She) will not be striving to accumulate wealth (though it is defensible to make enough provision for old age not to force others to support one). He will, by worldly standards, probably live relatively simply and be relatively generous to others. His priorities will not be worldly possessions, but “to learn and labour truly to get mine own living, and to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me” (the Prayer Book Catechism).

*The readings are for Lent 3: Ephesians 5.1-14, Luke 11.14-28.*