

Trinity 15 (17 September 2023)

“NO man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

+In the Name...

Nearly 22 years ago, my wife and I were married in this very parish. After our honeymoon, my first Sunday back in town was not here, but at the Presbyterian congregation on the other side of the creek where I served as organist. (I was a regular here at the Saturday night Anticipatory Mass in those days.) At coffee hour, one of the regulars asked me, “Where’s the boss?” I knew the man to be friendly and have a good sense of humor, so without hesitation, I pointed to my new bride on the other side of the church hall and replied, “She’s over there.” He gave me a big grin and said slyly, “Well, at least you

knew who I was talking about!” I cannot now remember his name, but he had been married many years when this conversation took place!

In preparing for this sermon, I decided to review the sermon of the Archbishop of Canterbury at the wedding of Princess Margaret to Antony Armstrong-Jones. *{A couple in the congregation are celebrating their wedding anniversary, and they chose their music based on what was played at that wedding.}* There seems to be no record of it, likely because there was not one. There was no sermon at my wedding, but I have been to Anglican weddings that did have sermons. I very clearly remember my homiletics professor in seminary telling us that attempting to preach to the bride and groom at their wedding was about as effective as preaching to the corpse at a funeral. (The assumption is that the happy couple have other things on their minds.) So, it is likely I would not have remembered a sermon even if it had been preached by the illustrious Bp. Connors.

So, we must turn to the text provided for us this morning: St. Matthew tells us, “Ye cannot serve both God and mammon.”

Mammon. What is mammon? I remember as a child thinking it had something to do with those large, hairy, elephant-like creatures that lived during the same time as the dinosaurs, but that certainly did not make any sense. Of course, children give up on any number of things in the church that do not seem to make sense. Sadly, one learns sometimes it is easier just not to ask...

Ironically, an older translation than our Authorized Version uses the word “riches”, which it is easier for us to understand, but does it really get the point of this Scripture text across? Riches were certainly in abundance at Princess Margaret’s wedding some 60 years ago, but just having them does not necessarily constitute *servicing* them. Some commentaries use the more general term “property”, but that still limits us to something physical. Enough of anything could constitute

riches. Elsewhere, mammon is not just defined as riches or wealth (although surely they could qualify), but any “evil influence or false object of worship and devotion”. Now we are not limited to financial matters, but anything we choose to place above our devotion to God. That famous bishop and doctor of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo, wrote a sermon on this text stressing how things for which we lust could easily become our “mammon”. Augustine was meaning those sins of the flesh, but one can lust, or have an unhealthy obsession, with anything. Our challenge is when we try to hold the two things in tension, perhaps hoping against hope that God will not realize the other one engulfs our attention. Of course, this is pure nonsense because we know that God is omniscient, or all-knowing. Trying to hide something from Him is less effective than trying to hide the piece of chocolate cake we tried to sneak out of the kitchen

without our Mom noticing, despite the cake crumbs on the floor, the dirty knife in the sink, and the smears of frosting across our face!

And as if our efforts were not futile enough, we should remember that God not only gives us everything we have, but has also created all those things we want that we do not have! As I searched in vain for the non-existent sermon from Princess Margaret's wedding, I was reminded of the words in the English Book of Common Prayer which were omitted from the American Prayer Book. As Mr. Armstrong-Jones placed the wedding ring on the princess's finger, he repeated the words after the Archbishop: "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, with all my worldly goods I thee endow." When you think of the finances of the two families, it is almost laughable: a freelance photographer who was a commoner telling a member of one of the wealthiest families in Britain that he would give her everything he had. It is good marriage theology, as a marriage

needs both halves to give 100% if it is going to work. But this particular [financially] lopsided marriage illustrates our relationship with God: God does not need us; He does not need our attention, or our physical possessions, or our emotions. Yet we find ourselves in this peculiar position of the One Who gave us everything asking us to be willing to give it back. Many of us are generous if we believe the party asking is truly in need or somehow deserving of our generosity. We could argue that God is deserving of it because He gave it to us in the first place, but He surely is not in need of anything we could possibly offer.

St. Matthew anticipates our argument that we are not trying to serve this mammon, whatever it is that has captured our attention, out of greed but out of necessity. This could be an easy argument to make if our mammon is limited to financial issues, especially in a city with rampant homelessness and our country coming off some of the

highest inflation in over a generation. But be not anxious, Jesus tells us, because God will provide food to eat and clothes to wear. What about our congregation? It has been a bumpy couple of years. Do we believe that God will provide the members and the means to continue our ministry in this place, to this neighborhood?

Liturgical historians believe that this Gospel reading was placed where it is in the Church year because it is near harvest time, or at least harvest time in Italy, as its placement pre-dates the Book of Common Prayer. The editors of the American Prayer Book added it to the Propers on Thanksgiving Day, a holiday unique to the American experience in that it is not just a harvest festival but also a day on which to give thanks to the Almighty for what He has provided over the past year.

I dislike the term, but in some parts of the Church they call this season “Ordinary time”. There is nothing “ordinary” about our God!

Nevertheless, what could have been a very ordinary Sunday, (as much as things are ever “ordinary” at the Parish of St. Mark), has become a marvelous opportunity not only to give thanks for what we have been given, but renew our commitment to God. “Thank you, God, for my finances, but help me to remain focused on You. Thank you, God, for my spouse, but help me to remain focused on You. Thank you, God, for providing such an abundance, that we can even have the concept of ‘mammon’!”

In the closing hymn [at 10:00] we shall sing, “Stand up, stand up for Jesus; Stand in his strength alone; The arm of flesh will fail you, Ye dare not trust your own:” As I have told the Inquirers class, all sin seems to have its basis in pride. Trust not in mammon, trust not in ourselves, but trust in and serve the ultimate “boss”, the God who made us.

+In the Name...