

Sermon Trinity XV

Ye cannot service God and Mammon

Ye cannot serve God and Mammon. It's a good text for the City of London and to be preached upon by a City Rector. Well, I'm glad to do it here and now. For it gives me the chance to give yet another example of how people will get hold of the wrong end of the stick when it comes to reading the Bible. Mammon is not money, but the corrupt use of money. Then people misquote the Bible and say *Money is the root of all evil*. But the Bible doesn't say that. It says *The love of money is the root of all evil*. You cannot *serve* God and money. Quite right. Though there is nothing wrong with money. But money should not be what we serve; it should be our servant.

Let's first get rid of the hypocrisy. Everybody would like a bit more money – a lot more money. You would. I would. I endlessly go round the City like the beggars in rags and tags or even like the beggar in a velvet gown trying to raise money for the church. But I want the money to keep the roof on so that people can come to St Michael's, hear the Gospel, receive the Sacraments and enjoy Christian fellowship. I'd like the church to be clean and bright and that's why I'm wearing my shoes out trying to raise money for redecoration. I can't do any of these things without money and to pretend I could is just humbug.

But greed, the obsession with money, is evil and it will make you unable to love God. That is, it will make you ill. The devil is very clever. He always conceals sin under a cloak of righteousness. So he manages to convince us that our obsession with money is a good thing, a virtue even. Remember in the days of our ill-founded boom those satanic adverts on TV for personal loans at a rate of interest which will have you paying through the nose for the rest of your life – or your house will be confiscated if you can't keep up the payments. Look at the hordes of perfectly respectable middle class people who pore over the personal finance and investment columns of *The Daily Mail* with a diligence they ought to reserve for reading the Bible. Even as they indulge their greed they pride themselves that they are being responsible, prudent, thrifty and virtuous. Yes, they *pride themselves*

Ah but the psychology of guilt intervenes like an exorbitant interest rate. And our unconscious mind, our conscience, invents dirty words for money – because deep down we are ashamed of our greed and avarice. Think of some of these dirty words: *filthy lucre; made his pile; rolling in it; loot, stinking rich* – and there are other expressions which I wouldn't dream of using in church. It's not just money that obsesses us, but the things money will buy: fancy food and smart clothes. But there's nothing wrong with a gourmet meal. Nothing wrong with dressing up. But it's when you find your identity, your meaning and purpose in these things that you lose your soul. *For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?*

Think of it: television is all cookery programmes and makeover shows. And behold, I show you a mystery: no one ever cooks what they see on the cooking programmes. These shows are only for drooling over when they come in from collecting a wire trolley full of processed packaged meals at the supermarket. And some people are so fussy, squeamish, about what they'll eat and what they won't. Like the woman who went into a restaurant and asked what the birds' nest soup was. The waiter told her, *Madam, it's made with the saliva of birds*. And she replied, *Oh, I could never eat anything that came out of a bird's mouth – just give me an egg*.

The worship of food and clothes is a false religion, and like any other religion it has its cavaliers and roundheads. The cavaliers buy tiaras and dine at The Ritz. The roundheads are the puritans and killjoys who dress down and go on faddish diets. *Ye are the salt of the earth*, but by God don't eat it – it'll put up your blood pressure. Lay off the fried eggs, cheese and milk for the sake of your cholesterol level.. Thou shalt eat five pieces of fruit each day and then thou shalt live forever and appear beautiful in the face of thy neighbour – even as beautiful as Virginia Bottomley. Frugality can be a sin as bad as greed. Self-denial can degenerate into masochism. And these things too are sinful obsessions.

These are all obsessions with self. Narcissism. Vanity. So many people can't find a lobe or other protuberance without putting a stud in it. Many are not content with the number of orifices God gave them: they have to make yet more. Young women deface their acres of flesh by having it tattooed. Or consider David Beckham, he sows not, neither does he reap, but earns £100,000 a week - and still can't afford a pair of jeans that aren't ripped. Generations earlier the Italian dictator Mussolini amused people on the newsreels when he took to getting himself up in the style of Laurel and Hardy: because they were on the movies, he thought they represented the best in transatlantic chic. Fashion is so horrible: that's why we have to change it so often.

All these fashions and fads are the product of our self-obsession. People go around doing an audit on their feelings all the time, watching themselves like their own personal *Big Brother*. They aren't helped by the mass media whose first question whether you've just lost a cricket match or just lost all your relatives in a train crash is *How did you feel when...?* It is part of the same touchy-feely mode of living that goes with fussing over food and clothes. The whole thing taken together is just navel-gazing, a recipe for dissatisfaction and anxiety. It's a waste of your life.

Jesus didn't say that money and food and clothes are bad. In fact he said the opposite. He didn't say, as the Buddhists say, *Cast aside the things of this world and confine your efforts to the world of spiritual things*. He dined with rich lawyers and had the reputation – confessed by his own mouth – of being a drunkard and a wine-bibber. He praised and valued earthly goods when he said, *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you*.

As ever with the sayings of Jesus, there is a carefully hidden meaning in today's gospel. What are these lilies of which Jesus speaks? Certainly they are virtuous emblems, as Christina Rossetti said:

*The lilies say, Behold how they
Preach - without words - of purity*

Lilies are also a flower found by the Sea of Galilee: they are called Madonna Lilies after the Mother of Jesus. Also known as the scarlet anemone. Scarlet. Note that word, scarlet. So *Take no thought for what ye shall put on*. Scarlet. Then recall Good Friday and Jesus before Pontius Pilate: *And they stripped him and put on him a scarlet robe*. Now read today's gospel with your understanding in awe and wonder. A scarlet robe And, *Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these*.

