



Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 31 July 2022

READINGS

Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9,43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Jesus' warning against the love of material possessions.

Greetings Friends. We are challenged again by God's Word, particularly so this week as our readings speak to the phenomenon of idolatry. The Colossians reading equates idolatry with greed. In the Gospel we see God rebuking a man for his confidence in financial security and Jesus warning his hearers against the love of material possessions.

In other places, Jesus warns against the pitfalls of wealth – his encounter with the rich young man, unable to give up his possessions, and Jesus's subsequent remark that it is not easy for those with wealth to enter God's kingdom; there is also the parable of the rich man and Lazarus whose fates on earth are seemingly reversed in the afterlife. In spite of the instances where Jesus seems to offer a of valuation of the rich and the poor, it is perhaps not helpful to dismiss out of hand, those who have wealth. Instead, let us try to understand the phenomenon of idolatry in its OT context and then return to the issue of wealth in its contemporary form.

When we think of idolatry in the Old Testament, perhaps we do so in moral terms – those guilty of idolatry are immoral. The phenomenon is more subtle and nuanced than this however. Firstly, we must see the ideological or polemical element in such narratives. The writers of the OT are competing, not just with surrounding religions, but with cultic practices within Judaism itself. There is a clear carry over of this in the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 (remnants of the northern Kingdom of Israel having its cultic centre at Shechem and Mount Gerizim). There is therefore a tendency to label anything that does not conform to the "sanctioned religion" as idolatrous.

The second factor pertains to the mechanism of idolatry itself, for in as much as different forms of "idolatry" represent either different cultic expressions within Judaism or different religions entirely, actual idols were not assigned identities (or deities) arbitrarily. There are passages which speak to the underlying dynamics of idolatry which suggest that idolatry has nothing to do with religion in the conventional sense. A well-known passage is from chapter 14 of the Wisdom of Solomon. Two explanations are offered here as to the origin of idolatry: a grief-stricken father crafts an image of his lost child and develops an unnatural devotion to the image and; an image crafted of a monarch for the use of devotion for people far away and unable to receive an audience with the king.

The other passage of Scripture which may be helpful in understanding the phenomenon of idolatry is from the Psalms. It appears almost verbatim in two Psalms – 115 and 135: "The idols of the nations are

silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them.” (Psalm 135:15-18) Importantly, there is a fetishism about the idol arising as a result of it being, a.) the product of human hands or labour and, b.) being comprised of precious metals. It is therefore not the material value of the idol which causes its devotion, but this fetishism or apparent agency which the idol possesses.

Lastly, it is helpful to listen to what is possibly the most extensive comment in the New Testament on the phenomenon. Commenting on the depravity of humankind, Paul says, “for though they knew God, they did not honour God as such or give thanks to God, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up... because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever!” (Romans 1:21-25)

Paul says that through an inversion of the created order – worshipping that which is created instead of that which created human beings, our minds become senseless and debased and we are made foolish. For whatever reason, the same is said to happen in Psalm 135 – there is a stupefying effect that comes from the worship of idols such that “those who make them...become like them.”

The expression in Judaism of “having an evil eye” means that one has become covetous or greedy for gain, which suggests there is a correlation between our propensity toward covetousness and our sight. When we develop a love for material possessions, we are in danger of being blinded spiritually.

If I may be so bold, and please accept this as my own estimation of the issue, I do not believe that those who have wealth, or even those who love wealth, will necessarily be excluded from heaven. It is the likely and inevitable outcome though that if we are unable to free ourselves from such love, we will never experience the true meaning of our lives on earth. Jesus says in our Gospel reading, “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” – not one’s afterlife, but one’s life, here and now, on earth. Amen.