

Trinity 19 Puy de Serre 22/10/17

Ex 33 12 end; I Thess 1 1-10; Mt 22 15-22

Earlier this year Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, produced a Lent Book, entitled Dethroning Mammon. In it he argued that Christians today face a battle against materialism, the modern form of idolatry, and need the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God to enable them to live in our rich western culture without losing sight of Jesus Christ and the way He calls us to live. How to live in the world, without being of the world, or as Moffatt's wonderful translation of Romans 12 v 2 states 'not letting the world squeeze us into its mould.' Or, to follow Jesus in today's gospel, giving to Caesar what belongs to him and to God what is rightfully His.

Jesus was responding to a trick question from the Pharisees, one designed to provide them with evidence to accuse Him, either of being disloyal to the occupying Roman power or to His Jewish faith but, as He did so often, He responded not with an answer which they hoped to find incriminating but another question which they were unable to answer.

How are we to answer it today? For me the starting point is that life itself is God's gift. I neither sought it nor can I in the long run preserve it by exercise, healthy eating, meditation or the like. But at some point by the grace of God I became aware that God loved me and wanted a relationship with me through His Son Jesus Christ. Giving of myself has become an increasing part of my answer, not because I must, but because experiencing His love inspires the gift of love in return. But, of course, this does not happen in a vacuum. I live in a world from which, short of going off to become a hermit, I cannot escape. Money and everything involved with the earning and spending of it is impossible to escape. Often I find myself facing conflicting interests. I am moved with compassion – along with thousands of others no doubt – seeing television pictures of the latest earthquake or half-starved refugees and want to do something to help. Shall I donate some money to their aid and, if so, how much? But, wait a minute, the gas bill is due and the car needs insuring and then there's Christmas. These are real demands and have to be met, so do they come first, do they limit my giving to God?

The biblical principle is quite clear. No, they should not. We should see God, not only as the giver of life, but of all we possess, so in response we are to give Him a tithe, 10%. I have found this to be a liberating thing to do. It does not solve the problem, but I feel, puts it on the right basis. God first, Mammon or Caesar second.

Interestingly enough the more I give to God the more I find two distinct and apparently contradictory things happening. Firstly the more I give to God, the more He seems to give to me. Even what we may have felt as sacrificial giving turned out to be a foretaste of our receiving far more in return, not necessarily in terms of money, though this was often the case, but in terms of love and joy and peace and laughter – those invaluable gifts from God. Secondly, and partly because of the truth of the experience I have just described, the more God blesses me in response to my giving or serving Him, the more I feel I want to give Him back, again not always in terms of money but also time and energy in seeking to help and promote justice for others .

This is where I think I find it easier to understand Moses and his conversation with God in our OT reading. God preserved him as a child, chose him to lead his people when he was a murderer and a refugee and gave him the gifts he needs to confront Pharaoh and to lead God's people to freedom. Not always an easy road, far from it. How often he must have been tempted to despair at their behaviour, perhaps beautifully summed up in a modern cartoon which you may have seen. Moses stands in front of the divided waters of the Red Sea urging the people to cross on the dry ground to escape the pursuing Egyptians. The caption reads, 'What do you mean, it's muddy?' In spite of all Moses continues to love the people he leads, often standing between them and God and pleading for their forgiveness. And God blesses him for it. The more Moses experiences of God the more he wants to know Him. This culminates in his desiring to know God's presence with him and the people in such a way that others will recognise it for what it is and in wishing to see God's glory.

Seeing God's glory has often been seen as the aim of our spiritual lives. In the Arthurian story of the Quest for the Holy Grail, Sir Galahad, the Grail winner, having successfully completed the Quest and been found worthy to receive the Grail, renounces chivalry and becomes a monk. After some time he is called by

God to look into the depths of the Grail where he see God's glory and is taken from this earth into heaven.

The Thessalonians to whom Paul writes in our epistle also caught sight of something of God's glory when they heard him preach the gospel of Jesus and saw it confirmed with works of power through the Holy Spirit and responded with joy by believing in Christ themselves, turning away from the worship of idols to know, love and serve the living God. In this way, Paul writes, they became an example to all around them. This perhaps all the more powerful because of the persecution they endure because of their belief.

This invites a final reflection on what it may mean for us to give to God what belongs to Him. St John clearly sees the glory of God exemplified in Jesus on the cross where He is lifted up to draw all people to Himself. He invites us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him.

Perhaps it is as, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we seek to do this that we find the only answer to the Pharisees' question. Everything we have is God's gift to us. He gives Himself to us in Jesus whom we receive through the Holy Spirit. He blesses and empowers us to show His love to others, by sharing our time, our talents, our possessions and ourselves with them and also, if need be, by speaking out against injustice, risking persecution to help them in their need.