

*Sermon for Proper 3, Year A  
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson  
Holy Nativity, Plano  
25 May, 2008*

Our Gospel reading this morning is a famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount. “You cannot serve God and mammon.” The word mammon means wealth. But it isn’t the Greek word for wealth. It is a word from Aramaic, the native language of Jesus and his companions. It’s not in Greek, because it’s a personification, like a name. Mammon is the name for that principle of worldly wealth and riches that demands your devotion and worship. It is wealth as an idol. So the question here is not about whether you have money or are good at making money. It’s a matter of devotion. To whom do you devote your life? God or Mammon?

But the interesting thing here is that Jesus obviously isn’t addressing himself primarily to the rich. We’ve only discussed the first verse of the passage. The entire rest of the passage deals with the primary reason for worshipping Mammon. And that is anxiety about material needs. The rich don’t usually have anxiety about material needs. If they do, then it’s a neurosis. But the poor naturally have that anxiety. And it is primarily to the poor that Jesus addresses the rest of this passage.

The fact is that we can get so worried about the future, so absorbed by our own needs and our own wants, that we fall down at the feet of the almighty dollar and worship it. And when we do that, we cut ourselves off from God. Our spirits wither and die. We become evil servants of evil Mammon, whose purpose is to destroy us and everything else.

So what’s the antidote to this anxiety? How do we protect ourselves from the temptation to worship Mammon? Jesus tells us that the only way to avoid the trap is faith. We have to trust God to take care of our needs. That’s his business. Only then will we be free to take care of our own business, which is to grow in holiness and righteousness.

I think sometimes people conceive of this all wrong. The picture they get in their heads is of a sort of perpetual irresponsible flower-child on the happy drug of faith, floating through life, not worrying about anything, much less tomorrow. I remember seeing a banner once in a Unitarian church that had a picture of flowers on it, and the caption was “Consider the lilies of the field...” And it just left it hanging there, as if you weren’t supposed to do anything except some sort of Zen meditation on the flowers themselves.

But that’s not what we’re talking about here. The point isn’t the flowers. The point is the God who cares for the flowers, and the birds, and all of creation.

And he will care for you too, if you will only let him. That doesn't mean not planning carefully. It doesn't mean not saving. But it does mean not using those things as excuses for not doing what God has asked you to do. And once you've done what you can do today, it means trusting God for what you need tomorrow. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," and he will supply what you need.

In our Old Testament passage this morning, the prophet Isaiah shows us the care God intends for his people. After judgment and exile and affliction, he will bring them back and shepherd them like a flock of sheep. And they "shall feed along the ways, on all bare heights shall be their pasture". They won't have to leave the path for food, even if the path leads over the rocky hills. All their needs will be taken care of.

Then God's people are represented in the personification of mount Zion. And Zion refuses to rejoice in God's care. She says, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." In other words, "That's all very well, but it has nothing to do with me. God will take care of the people he still likes, but not me." You see, one of the reasons we don't trust God is that we don't feel worthy of his attention. We assume that because we know we have failed, and because we feel far from God, that he won't take care of us *any more*.

But God has a response to that. "Can a woman forget her nursing baby?" he says. "Can she stop loving and caring for the child that she carried in her woman?" Our first answer is "Of course not!" But then we remember that it *can* happen, but it's so unnatural that it doesn't usually. God says, "Even mothers may forget their children, but I will never forget you." The love and care that God has for us is *stronger* than the connection a mother has for her child. It is so strong that it is impossible for him to forget you or forsake you!

"Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands," he says. The usual thing would be for the slave to have the name or mark of his master tattooed on his hand. But here, the master has stooped to mark his own hand with the name of the servant. And the name is graven on the palms of the hands. It will never come off.

God knows everything we need, even better than we do ourselves. And he will provide it for us. But the most important thing we need is to trust him and obey him. If we begin to do that, God will delight in showing us his provision.