

Homily092219

GOD OR MAMMON: SEEKING POWER

In the summer of my twenty-first year I worked in a fishery on Long Beach Island. It was a great learning experience. The proprietors were hard-working but sometimes ethically challenged. One of the fellows, Jim, had a low patience level when the crowds at the counter grew large and impatient. He would be filleting fish and wrapping and weighing and then calculating the cost per pound. If he didn't like you he would slap the fish on the scale, quickly remove the fish from the scale, as he read the highest level before the scale settled on the real weight. It was his way of extracting just a little bit of an extra benefit from having to wait on the demanding public.

The principal that Jesus cites in the gospel today is pretty straightforward. He who is honest in small things will be reliable in big things. He who is dishonest in small things will be unreliable in big things. Our own experience would probably prove the truth of what Our Lord is saying. That fishery worker undoubtedly felt he was entitled to "a little extra" for all his trouble. Do you see how his mind worked? "Whatever I am being paid is not adequate to reward me for the aggravation I have to put up with. I am entitled to a little extra." We don't always realize when we begin to think like this but it happens often enough. We begin to be dishonest and lacking truth in small things. We have to step back and do a good examination of conscience lest we fall into bad patterns that turn us into unreliable persons.

Why do we do the things we do then? Whom do we serve? Jesus makes another very simple statement that we cannot serve two masters. For to do so will divide our hearts. We will love one and hate the other, give in to one or dominate the other. The Lord says: You cannot serve both God and Mammon. Who even knows what Mammon is? My mother taught me a lot of very practical things to do but she never told me to be on the lookout for Mammon. I'm guessing the same for you. What is Mammon?

Way back mammon was something of value that came to you either through hard work and a purchase or through inheritance. It was something that you would not necessarily use right away but would put aside for safe keeping for use at another time. It was valuable. Often it was given to a bank or broker to hold and secure. Slowly, over time, it grew in importance and significance in a person's life or in a family's life and people started making decisions on what was best to enhance their control of this mammon or inheriting this mammon. Sometimes it loomed larger and larger and became more important than anything else. It then held a power over the person, or the family or even a people.

Voila! “Mammon” began to rival God. Remember the first of the Ten Commandments. “I am the Lord thy God thou shalt not have strange gods before me.” This possession, this item, this power can become more important than anything else in life—if I let it, if I allow it, if I want it to. But here’s the point: It is not so much the thing as it is our attachment to the thing, our attachment to the power. Mammon could be a variety of things. It could be money—or other possessions—or work. It could be the priesthood for me if I let it. It could be motherhood or fatherhood for you if you let it. Mammon could be your own private way of seeing things or understanding things. Mammon could be an inordinate attachment to a person. Mammon can be my attachment to a mentality of entitlement like the man in the fishery. Mammon is anything or anyone we allow to become an idol in our lives—an idol that replaces our allegiance to the Living God and our fidelity to the truth of the gospel way of life announced by Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the most common forms of mammon is power, control. Is the Lord in charge in my life or am I? Does the teaching of Christ take precedence in the decisions I make or is there a whole different calculus I make about living in this world? Is my faith just something for Church and worship or is the Lord first in my life, my family, my soul? Another way to understand all of this is: Mammon is my desire. You cannot serve both God and your own desire.

Listen to these words from our retired pontiff Benedict XVI from his first Mass as Pope Benedict:

Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? . . . No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ—and you will find true life. Amen.

Serve God.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.