

WHERE IS THE VIA MEDIA?
A Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
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Whenever Jesus speaks, what he says often raises questions. While I was thinking about this sermon, but before I had put any words on paper, I had the odd association of what I was thinking with that hymn that kept running through my mind until I decided to become a Postulant. You all know the hymn, “Jesus Calls Us O’er the tumult”. I recognized that the statement, “Jesus raises many questions” has the same meter.

Our Gospel lesson is a familiar one, and it raises questions for us in this modern world, 2000 years in time and many discoveries and changes removed from first century Israel. Our gospel lesson is in the second half of the Sermon on the Mount in Chapter 6 of St. Matthew’s Gospel. At the beginning of Chapter 6, Jesus changes the subject. In the latter part of Chapter 5, He had been talking about sins: anger, lust, divorce , false swearing and the making of oaths, desire for retaliation, and then the necessity to love your neighbor.

At the beginning of chapter 6, He changes the subject to the need for humility in one’s relation to God, of not being showy when praying or when giving alms to the poor; He gives the Lord’s Prayer as a model prayer; and He speaks about not being showy and public about fasting.

That is a lead-in to His talking about laying up treasures in heaven. If you look at it in one way, you can see that our Gospel lesson for today could, and perhaps should, have begun at verse 19: Matthew 6:19-21 19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (ESV) Here, Jesus begins to talk about our relationship to God as opposed to the things of the earth.

The next two verses may seem to be out of place, but they aren’t. They very much belong there: Matthew 6:22-23 22 "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, 23 but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! While it is true that some of the ancient peoples in the eastern Mediterranean thought that the eye actually emitted light that interacted with the light from the sun and then came back to the eye to make sight

possible, that is not what Jesus is talking about here. He is using the eye as a metaphor for the heart, for a person's desires. We covet mostly with our eyes. Because our sight is so much better than any of our other senses, we almost cannot covet something without having seen it because covetousness is more than just a matter of wanting something; it is a matter of wanting a particular thing – of wanting “that one” and not any other. St. John attests to this in his first Epistle: 1 John 2:16-17 **16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. 17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.**

Now we come to the first verse of our lesson, verse 24, which almost all Bibles that divide various parts of chapters into “sub-units” or paragraphs, put as the last verse of a unit that began at verse 19, “Lay not up ...” rather than as the first verse of the next unit. Verse 24, of course says: Matthew 6:24 **24 No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.** That is what it says in the KJV. Most modern translations say, “Matthew 6:24 **You cannot serve God and money.**”

There are two sentences in this verse, and there is a single theme in each of them – service. There are three words for service in Greek for three kinds of service. There is the service of an chattel slave who is considered to be the property of his master, called a **σώμα**, just a body, which is what we usually think of when we hear the word *slave*. The second type of slave is a bond servant, called a **δούλος**. A bond servant could be someone working off a debt or to obtain something, Jacob could be called a bond servant to Laban while he was working to obtain Rachel as his wife. St. Paul calls himself a **δούλος** in Romans 1:1, but in different English editions of the Bible it is translated as slave, bondservant, and servant. In the ESV, Romans 1:1 says, “**Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,**” The third type of servant is a free servant for which the Greek word is **διάκονος**.

What is being indicated here in the verbs of verse 24 is that the type of service being talked about is that of a bondservant, so that is we are either in bondage to God, or we are in bondage to mammon, and, ... the world.

Many of us who grew up with the KJV of the Bible thought that “mammon” was the name of another God like Moloch. It turns out that *mammon* is almost a letter for letter transliteration into Greek for the Aramaic word, *mamona*, that means money, riches, and possessions. The way

Jesus is using it here, *mammon* could be capitalized because He is using the word as a personification of money and riches, which are things that have been worshipped as a god by many almost ever since money was invented and it was possible for one person to “own” more than was needed for everyday life. When you look at it this way, you can see that serving Mammon is in fact a form of idolatry.

When you know that Mammon is a personification of money – treasures – you can see that verse 24 belongs to the passage that begins with Matthew 6:19-21 **19 Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: 20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: 21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.** Where your heart is, is what you idolize and what you will worship. The trouble is that while Jesus was being tempted by Satan, His reply to Satan when Satan asked Jesus to worship him was this: Matthew 4:10 **10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.** What Jesus did here was to quote what Moses said in Deuteronomy 6:13. The service He is talking about here is worship

This puts us here in the 21st century in the United States in something of a quandary. Jesus spoke those words to people on a hillside in the early first century, about 20 years short of 2000 years ago. They lived in what we would call an agrarian economy, but there were no economists to tell them when how to run their economy and whether it was good or bad. We know there was some money, but there was certainly a lot of barter going on as well. *Mamona*, the Aramaic word, meant riches of any type: money, clothing, food, wine, livestock, land or other things.

The thing we need to see here is that both God and Mammon are being looked on as slave holders, and there is almost an implied dichotomy. Someone who just works for someone else as an employee can hold two jobs; but he cannot be a slave, bondservant or chattel, to two masters, particularly if one of those two masters is God, and the other is the World where the treasure is money. Jesus is saying that you cannot serve both of those masters, not as a devoted servant, that one of them will become dearer to your heart. D. A. Carson says about this: “Either God is served with a single-eyed devotion, or He is not served at all. Attempts at divided loyalty, betray, not partial commitment to discipleship, but deep-seated commitment to idolatry. As Jesus

said a few verses before the beginning of our Gospel lesson: Matthew 6:21 **21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

Disciples of Jesus Christ (and we Christians are supposed to be His disciples) are also supposed to be bondservants of God. As Christians, our work on earth is not to lay up treasures on earth. Rather it is to lay up treasures in Heaven. Our problem today, in this day and time, is how do we resist the lure of Mammon when we live in a world in which there is an economy built on money, where almost everything has a price. There is a old definition of a cynic as a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. The treasures of heaven have a far greater value than anything in the world, greater than even life itself, for our life on earth is short, while life in Heaven will be forever.

Our problem seems to be how do we answer the question, How shall we live in a world devoted to money and the accumulation of things? Is it even possible in such a world to lay up treasure in heaven? Is there a *via media*, a path so dear to Anglicans, that threads between laying up treasures on earth and laying up treasures in heaven? Where is this *via media*? Is it really a path or is it a tightrope, a narrow thread, as narrow as the line between good and evil?

There is a way; it is a path; but it is narrow. It is not a tightrope or a thread, and it is the path that all Christians must walk. It is simply the path to that narrow gate, the path of Good, the path of Holiness. As David Turner put it in his commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew, "Our heart is our inner intellectual and volitional core, the source of our deeds. Human finiteness alone, not to mention the exacerbating effects of sin, makes it very difficult to focus the heart solely on God and not on our possessions. Our heart is inevitably drawn to what we value the most; and if the values of the Kingdom of God are the priority, we are indeed laying up treasure in heaven. Seeking heavenly treasure, however, does not amount to avoidance of earthly involvement."

We are not called to avoid the world. We are not called to be eremites, those first Christian hermits who forsook civilization to go live in the desert. We have all heard the admonition, "**we may have to be *in* the world, but we are not to be *of* the world.**" That statement is not found in the Bible. However, it is a distillation of what Jesus said in His great High Priestly prayer in John 17 and in many other sayings in the Bible such as what St. Paul said in Colossians 3:2 **2 Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.** This is it. We have to spend the first part of our eternal lives on this earth, and then the rest in heaven, ... if we remain faithful.

What the rest of our Gospel lesson is telling us is about some things on the earth that we should not be concerned about: what to eat, what to drink, and what to wear; that worrying about such things is actually a sin. We are simply to put our trust in God's Providence, which does not mean that we get to just lie back as did some of the Corinthians and wait for that Providence to drop food or water into our mouths as if we were baby birds. We do not get to be lazy and do nothing in anticipation of Christ's Second Coming as did some the Thessalonians that St. Paul described in 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12 **11 For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. 12 Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.**

No, we are to work, and in this world and time, that means to make money, to tithe from it, and to save from it in anticipation of times of famine and to be able to help others who have fallen on hard times because that is the Christian way. We do this because in this time, in this economy, so very few people work the land and make clothes I do not say this to promote what is called a Gospel of Prosperity. Jesus is not promoting prosperity here, nor is He saying that go about starving and dressed in rags. What He is saying is that if we have faith in God and seek His Kingdom, that we are not to worry about clothes and food and drink because God will provide them. The key to understanding this lies in the last phrase of verse 30, where after describing the beauty of the lilies of the field, He says: **Matthew 6:30 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?** The whole thing comes down to faith. If we are full of worry, it is because we lack faith. Carson says it simply, "The root of anxiety is unbelief."

In the last verse of our lesson, the KJV says: **Matthew 6:34 34 Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.** We do read and understand that verse the way it was understood in 1611. "Take ... no thought" doesn't mean, "Don't even think about it!" Back then it meant, "Don't worry about it!" Just as in other places in the KJV where it says "Be not careful" it means "Don't be full of cares." Jesus is not saying for the disciples (or us) never to think about such things, only that we should not worry about them. Why? Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells us that God is saying to us in this passage, "I gave you life, is not your life worth more than the food and

clothes you are worrying about? It is God Who gave us life and Who sustains us. We worry only because we are of little faith.

One last thing: that beautiful last phrase, “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” seems cryptic to us 400 years after it was first published. It really means, Each day has enough trouble for itself. So, today will have enough trouble for today, and so will tomorrow have enough for itself. The point is that God will give us sufficient grace today to endure or overcome today’s trouble; and then tomorrow, He will give us sufficient grace to get through tomorrow’s trouble.

Worry is a symptom of a weak faith or a loss of faith. God is always there for us. It is also true that Sufficient unto the day is the grace God gives us. Whenever we begin to yield to worry or anxiety, we should pray as did the father of the child with the unclean spirit, Mark 9:24 “I believe; help my unbelief!”

AMEN!