

## Luke 16:1-13

“You cannot serve God and wealth” (Luke 16:13). Probably some of you will be familiar with translations that read: You cannot serve God and Mammon. That word Mammon is there in the Greek text of the Gospel, but it’s not a Greek word. It’s a Hebrew or Aramaic word that Jesus would probably have used when he spoke these words in Aramaic. But it wouldn’t have meant anything to Greek readers of Luke’s Gospel. So why did Luke keep this Aramaic word when he wrote his Gospel in Greek? I think it’s because, in that sentence, “You cannot serve God and Mammon,” it sounds like Mammon should be the name of a pagan God, a rival to the God of Israel.

Jesus is actually taking up the old demand for exclusive devotion to the one true God that goes way back in the tradition of Israelite faith. Remember the great contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on mount Carmel. Elijah says to the people, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him.” He could well have said: You cannot serve the Lord God and Baal. In pagan religion, of course, there was no problem about worshipping more than one god. Different gods were appropriate for different aspects of life. If one god didn’t seem to be favouring you in the way you wanted, you might try another god. But the God of Israel was different. This God required exclusive devotion. Remember the first great commandment, as Jesus called it, when he quoted it from the law of Moses: “The Lord your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” The point is that if you devote your whole self to this one God, there cannot be any room for other gods.

The people of Israel learned that lesson the hard way, over many centuries of history you can read in the Old Testament. They learned it well. By the time of Jesus we hear very little about Jewish people being tempted to worship other gods. On the contrary, the fact that they didn’t was what other people most often noticed about them. Of course, they would say, the Jews have their own national god, but why don’t they also worship the other gods, as everyone else does? To other people the insistence of the Jews on the exclusive worship of only one god was weird or worse.

But Jesus saw that this didn’t necessarily mean that the danger of idolatry had disappeared. You may not be trying to serve some other divine being as well as the God of Israel, but might you not be giving something else the role of a god in your life. Wealth, for example. Mammon. You are well aware you can’t serve both God and Molech, but you need to be sure you’re not trying to serve God and Mammon. Jesus speaks here very much to our modern situation. He’s updating the old warning against idolatry for a world in which we are probably not tempted to worship other, purported divine beings. But an idol isn’t just something you find in a temple. An idol is whatever in our lives competes with God for our loyalty and service.

In this passage Jesus is focussing on wealth or material possessions. But his teaching applies just as well to other things: career, reputation, power, pleasure or even those we love. Just a few weeks back we heard in the Gospel that very hard word of Jesus: unless we love him more than those who are dearest to us, we cannot be his disciples (I paraphrase). It all sounds very demanding, maybe impossibly demanding, but it also makes good sense, as Jesus helps us to see by means of that little parable: “No servant can serve two masters: for a servant will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.” This assumes, of course, a situation in which a servant is in the full-time service of his employer. Back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Italian dramatist Carlo Goldoni wrote a play called *The Servant of Two Masters*. You

may have seen it performed. There is a kind of modern remake of it called *One Man, Two Guvnors*, which was very successful in London, I believe, not so long ago. Goldoni took the idea from Jesus and turned it into a very entertaining comedy about a servant who takes up two offers of a job and tries to serve both his masters. So what does he do when they both want their lunch at the same time? It cannot be done, but the comic potential of the attempt is considerable.

Jesus's audience would have appreciated that. The operative word here is *serve*. A servant can't serve two masters, can't be devoted to both, can't give all his time and energy to both, because they both require his undivided loyalty and attention. But what does that really mean when we think of the total and exclusive devotion that God requires of us? Must we all become monks and nuns in enclosed orders and spend all our time in prayer and worship? No, because the special thing about loving God is that it can and should include all the other good and proper concerns of our lives. It means that all those other concerns must take their place within our overall devotion to God. They must be forms of service to God, and because God is the Lord over all things they can be that. The most obvious one is, of course, what Jesus called the second commandment: to love our neighbour as ourselves. That's not in competition with the first commandment, because God wants us to love our neighbours and loving our neighbours is a good part of what it is to love God. What loving God with our whole self and our whole life does is to put everything else in its proper place. We serve our neighbour better if above all we serve God. We do our work better if we see it as part of our service to God and let that make a difference. Above all, of course, doing everything for the love of God takes the selfishness out of it.

That's the goal of the Christian life: to reorientate the whole of life so that nothing in it remains outside the love and the service of God. There is to be no aspect of our lives in which we serve an idol, a goal that competes with God, whether it be money, power, reputation, pleasure, or just self. In order to be fully human, we don't need other goals outside the love of God, because God is big enough to include all the proper goals and values of life in this world. And therefore, the love of God unifies life. Typically modern life is fragmented. Different aspects of life – work, family, interests, social duties – all pull in different directions. Loving God gives us a unifying goal that brings all those things into a whole and puts them in perspective.

Now I want to say something about a remarkable example that we have all been thinking about in the past week. I think we have probably all realised things about the late Queen Elizabeth that we have known all along but only really recognize and appreciate when we look back over her remarkable life. The word "service" of course has been used a lot. From an early age she devoted herself to the service of her people and that has been the keynote of her life. Another appropriate word is humility. One way that appears, I think, is the fact that by all accounts she showed genuine interest in all the people she met and talked to. She made people feel they mattered to her. It takes humility, not thinking you're a much more important person than others, to do that. For someone in high office, the great temptation is arrogance. Real humility is a rare gift that makes all the difference to living out the role that Queen Elizabeth was given. It isn't easy to think of other big players on the world stage who have had so much of it.

But how did she do it? In the past week a lot of emphasis has been placed on Queen Elizabeth's deep Christian faith. We knew about it because in recent years she spoke very openly about it, but it has, I think, been interesting to see how our normally very secular media have not shied away from drawing attention to it. It must be many years since Christian faith has been referred to so often in one week on BBC television.

It is testimony not only to the Queen's faith but to the power of her witness to it. I think one reason why she spoke more often and more clearly about it in recent years may have been that in our secular society people who were impressed by her life of service would not necessarily suppose that it was rooted in her faith in God unless she actually said so. Her verbal witness to Jesus Christ was all the more powerful because it came in the wake of her years of selfless service. No one could think she was just paying lip service to faith, as many politicians in the past may well have done. No one could think that, because she had so obviously been living out her faith for decades. Yet her witness required both the practice of her faith and her gentle and warm speaking out about it. A combination I would suggest we all need to emulate in our time.

Here is just one quotation from her Christmas broadcasts that particularly struck me when I came across it recently: "For me the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to live my life." I don't think we hear that sort of language much today even from Christians: "my own personal accountability before God." It's a considered phrase that reflects, I imagine, her own life of prayer in which she habitually sought the ability to carry out her daunting range of duties and responsibilities. Her role was a vocation given her by God. She was accountable to God for the way she fulfilled it. And she relied on the resources God gave her to do so. It has been said that for her the key moment at her coronation was the anointing which took place out of sight of the congregation in the abbey and out of sight of the television audience too. It was the most personal moment in which she committed herself to her vocation from God and understood herself to be blessed by God with the gifts of the Spirit, symbolized by the oil of anointing, for the role God had given her.

I return to my question: How did she do it? And I want return also to the main point of this sermon. I would sum it up this way: Queen Elizabeth was able to love and serve her people so devotedly because first and foremost she loved and served God. Her humility, her unfailing patience and kindness, her outgoing concern for people of all sorts – all these were possible because from an early age and from the beginning of her reign she devoted her life to the service of God. There was plenty of room in her life for her family, for her love of corgis and horseracing and the highlands of Scotland, for humour and delight. Devotion to God gives all such good things their place in a life of service. I'm sure they all helped her to love God.

I have no doubt that had Queen Elizabeth II lived a thousand years ago she would be declared a saint, like the Saxon kings Edmund and Edward, or the Scottish queen Margaret, or the French king Louis IX. They did things differently then – both being monarchs and making saints. The Church of England has no means of declaring people saints. I'm not sure it matters much. Most saints go unrecognized: they are ordinary people who live ordinary lives with extraordinary devotion to God. Those close to them know that, but not many others, yet their influence for good is incalculable. Queen Elizabeth would not have wanted us to exalt her above those unknown saints, but just because we do know her and the world knows her, her memory can inspire us. As Jesus said of the good Samaritan in his parable, "Go and do likewise."

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