

## Homily 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year

The readings in the last few weeks or so have, in one way or another, focussed on the theme of choice. A couple of weeks ago the first reading, from the book of Ecclesiasticus, spoke of the choice between fire and water, life or death. It is for us to choose. Why? Because God has given us the freedom to do so. The very fact of our being made in his image and likeness includes the freedom choose, even the wrong choice, should we so wish. Everything about us reflects something of God's nature: the capacity to love, the capacity to give, a freedom to choose.

Today's Gospel returns again to this theme. Jesus is still preaching the sermon on the mount; he warms to his theme: 'no man can be the slave of two masters...you cannot be the slave both of God and of money.' Let us be clear about one thing. In the most fundamental way, the choice is not really a choice at all. Life or death, fire or water, God or money, or mammon. It's obvious isn't it? Why, then, do so many people so often choose wrongly? It's one thing to have that freedom but, in the end, there is only one real choice. However, it is not an easy one. Inevitably, it seems, the right choice seems to lead us through narrow gates, along hard roads, roads of self renunciation and cross carrying. No wonder we might be tempted to opt for the easy life, the soft option and the wide and smooth road.

It would be very easy, especially in such a difficult financial climate, to talk about the contrast between God and money. It would be very easy to gain some cheap applause and indulge in a little easy banker bashing and launch a broadside against fat cats and their bonuses which are invariably described as obscene. We could talk about greed and selfishness and injustice. And there are indeed huge injustices in our world. But is that our hunger for justice

talking, or our jealousy and resentment? But we would be in great danger, I think, of missing one very important point.

Essentially, the choice set before us is not God and Mammon. If it were simply that, no banker and probably *nobody* would get anywhere near the Kingdom of Heaven. No. May I dare to suggest that the choice is the choice between God and Not God? In other words, mammon is anything which gets in the way of our search for God. It is anything which lures us away from our true home, our true goal and our true path.

If you reflect on that basic point you will discover some disturbing implications. If mammon is indeed anything that diverts us from our journey to God, not just money or possessions, then you might be very startled to discover just how many things in our lives can assume the status of an idol, a false god.

St Augustine's great work, his Confession, opens with these words: 'Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and infinite is thy wisdom. And man desires to praise thee, for he is a part of thy creation; he bears his mortality about with him and carries the evidence of his sin and the proof that thou dost resist the proud. Still he desires to praise thee, this man who is only a small part of thy creation. Thou hast prompted him, that he should delight to praise thee, for thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee.'

That is the true driver of our lives: the search for God. The problem is that we can look in the wrong places. We can make idols of money and possessions, certainly. But we can also make idols of success, drink, sex and, yes, even church buildings.

But Jesus tells us that this is not possible. In the end, there is really only one choice: to cast all your trust on God, to give up on worry and let him take charge. It is expressed beautifully in our first and very short reading from the prophet Isaiah: 'Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you.'

Augustine's words, quoted earlier, are an echo of the sentiments expressed in the psalm: in God alone is my soul at rest, my help comes from him. He alone is my rock, my stronghold, my fortress.'

The question for us today is this. Can we really quite bring ourselves to believe this? Really? The saints might have done, some certainly did. Most of us, I suspect, are more likely to adopt the line taken by Gypsy Rose Lee, the actress and entertainer famous for the phrase: God is love, but get it in writing.

We can do better than that. Let us take to heart Jesus's words and learn to have a little trust. I realise I am preaching as much to myself as to you as I am probably one of the greatest worriers imaginable. So, two tasks are given to us today. First, to identify whatever is Mammon to us, what diverts us from God and him alone. Second, and related, what prevents us from putting our complete trust in the loving God who made us, and who son redeemed us, and whose Spirit is breathed upon us. As Mark Twain said, 'I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.'