

October 26, 2008

Many of you are probably aware that when the first universities were established in this state there was a very clear intention that they be secular institutions which, in particular, meant that theology would not be taught.¹ This intention has largely been honoured, although in other states theological faculties have been established in state universities and here in Melbourne there has been some mutual recognition of courses across theological and secular institutions. It is not likely that our universities will ever establish theological departments, but it has long seemed to me that if they ever did, theology – or Christian theology, at least – should be situated within the faculty of economics and commerce.

This would also almost certainly never happen, which would be a great missed opportunity, for it would make sense in terms of where the debates which matter about our gods would most helpfully take place. In an opinion piece in *The Age* this week (October 20) Chris Middendorp remarked that

"It's an extraordinary feature of Western society that economics, potentially the most important contributor to social cohesion on the planet, is also one of the least understood and most reviled of subjects".

In the piece, Middendorp criticised the obscurity of the field of economics, and noted the dubious status of economists these days. It struck me how close his analysis was to common critiques of theology, belief and theologians. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to cast the economy as a deity, economists as its theologians, and politicians and economic policy makers as its priests, dispensing the divine wisdom or placating economic gods. Certainly, billions of dollars have been sacrificed upon the altar in recent weeks to ward off the wrath of the economy.

Perhaps our gospel text this morning – and the first part in particular – would seem to be a word for our day, with its economic turmoil. Each day the reported news greets us with more accounts of failed financial institutions, the woes of the market, and the desperate attempts of governments across the world to keep at bay the demon Recession and its more sinister cousin Depression (as well they should). In this context we hear today, "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth". We may also have in the back of our minds the words of St Paul: the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6.10).

¹ This had more to do with the problems of denominational sectarianism than it did with anti-religious sentiment.

The current economic crisis would seem to be evidence of what happens when we overstep in this matter. And yet we must be wary of over-moralising here, particularly if any of us find ourselves largely insulated from the turmoil. For it is not simply a matter of a lot of rich people suddenly ending up poor or, at least, less rich. With the loss of billions of dollars in capital through mismanagement of our financial institutions has come the loss of homes and livelihoods, and most likely many lives as well. Hearing what Jesus says here about the worship of mammon should not be heard as a word declared against individuals who spend *themselves* in their pursuit of wealth. *My* single-minded pursuit of getting richer has direct effects *on those around me*. The moral dimension in the Scriptural attitudes to the role money can play in our lives is not that money turns our hearts from God. Or, rather, it is not only this. Just as important in the whole equation is that certain ways of pursuing wealth turn our hearts away from our neighbours. More to the point – our pursuit of wealth can bring great harm to others. To say the whole thing Christianly – money can turn our hearts from God *by* turning our hearts from our neighbour.

As an illustration of the link between our gods and our neighbours, with particular reference to our economies, we might note the irony in current approaches to the perceived threats of climate change. Political leaders right across the world seem convinced both that significant and highly detrimental climate change lies ahead of us, *and* that there is something we can do about it. Now, it doesn't matter for our purposes here whether these convictions are valid. The interesting point in relation to Jesus' teaching here is that although it is widely held that there is much to fear, and also much which we might do about it, we are all very hesitant to act in such a way that might affect our economic strength in relation to the strengths of other nations. The problem is that economic strength is currently very closely tied to carbon emissions, and even more so in countries like Australia than in others. Although I know that my carbon emissions "must" be reduced dramatically in the short term, I won't commit to such reductions without parallel commitments being made by others. Part of the reason that others won't change their emissions is that they are hoping that we will do more than they to bear the costs of such change, although doubtless we harbour a corresponding wish. Multiply the number of players in all this, and we have a Mexican standoff on a global scale, each nervous about taking the first big steps. My economic standing – my wealth – must be preserved; but the important point is that this seems to require that others' wealth be diminished,

or at least not increased relative to mine. The irony, of course, is that this god's wrath must be placated, so that we find ourselves damned if we seek to propitiate and damned if we don't. It is this way with all homage to blind and loveless gods.

The love of money – the serving or worship of “mammon” – is not simply a matter of doing the wrong thing, or focussing on the wrong “god”. The “wrongness” here is in the impact such misdirected devotion has on those who are less fervent or effective in their “worship”. Others are impacted upon by the machine which generates my prosperity; and in the end I, too, will suffer. Our relationship to our gods affects our relationship to our neighbours – and this applies as much to the relationship between our dealing with the economy and our dealing with our neighbours as it does to the “real” god we worship and how we relate to other people – whether by blowing them up in the name of some god or offering our hand in love and service in the name of a god.

It is the link between our gods and our neighbours which is the key to making sense of the second part of today's reading, or allowing it to make sense of us. Perhaps of all the extraordinary things we've heard Jesus say over the last four months, this is the most astounding.

6.31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

The objections are many, and obvious. Most of these objections have to do with the radical distinction we usually draw between the tangible and the intangible, by which we mean the world and God. The world and God are for us most of the like oil and water. On this understand the implication of Jesus' teaching here would seem to be that divining a water supply will provide us with all the oil we need. “Seek first the kingdom of God” would not be a problem were it not that it was then implied that “all things will be added to you”, as if religious devotion could take the place of earning a living, a kind of spiritual alchemy in which working on God brings material gain – prayer putting food on the table and a roof over our heads.

Now, the difficulty of these readings is not a simply matter of how *hard they* might seem, but a matter of what it is about our *current understandings* which seems *right and easy*. If the God of the gospels makes us feel uncomfortable, who or what is the god with which we are currently at peace (for we may be sure that we have placated some power if we find ourselves living in “peace”). What is it which would have to change about our understanding today for us to be transformed to the view of the

human life Jesus presents in the Sermon on the Mount? As long as God and the world are radically separate for us, Jesus can only be dismissed here as ridiculous and idealistic. But to bring God and the world *together* is not to reassert what is already ridiculous – that prayer can be treated as a magic which causes food, clothing and housing to materialise. The world which is wrongly separated from God is not the world of science with its laws and descriptions, but the world of human relations.

To “seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness”, while it might be called a “spiritual” aim, in Christian faith takes the specific shape of becoming *ourselves* the presence of God and his righteousness for those around us. This needs to be said with caution, but said nevertheless if the Incarnation is to be taken seriously. The kingdom of God takes shape among us when *we* take shape as a community of care, support and nurture for each other and for those who might come into contact with that community. This remains *God's* work, because it requires a giving and *forgiving* which is quite unnatural to us, but it is nevertheless a social and so a political and economic reality.

As far as we can tell the lilies of the field and the birds of the air not only *do* not worry but *cannot*. But we can. We worry about “the elements” which might impact upon us, about keeping the powers at bay. Yet the suggestion of the gospel is that in fact there is little real fear, and little which matters I can't do – including even dying – if you are there with me. The kingdom of God and *its* righteousness is present when we find safety and security here and now. This begins with the presence of the crucified and risen Jesus. Crucified, he is the sign of the failure of our relationships as it arises from the worship of false gods and the alienation from each other that such worship brings. Risen, he is also the sign of the restoration and forgiveness which overcomes fear and alienation, and which springs from the Father's refusal to allow other gods final sway over human life.

The good news here is that free and open life is seen in Jesus of Nazareth, and in his continued presence among us that life is made available today as a real and liberating alternative to lives lived under the alienating and fear-inducing powers which spring up in any human community. To seek first *this* God's kingdom and its righteousness is not to abandon responsibility for ourselves and others, but to embrace it, and to discover in the embrace of others that all things are added to us.

By the grace of this God, may this kingdom and its righteousness ever find new inroads into the lives of his people. Amen.