

TITLE: “The Ant and the Idol”

Our 4th and 5th grade science class at St. George has been studying insects. We caught a grasshopper the other day to examine the various parts and pieces of its body. If you were to ask a child in Virginia, which is better, a grasshopper or an ant? They would be puzzled by the question. They might say the ant is better because the grasshopper eats up your garden. But, in Mississippi, there would be no question, the ant is worse. Brendan, our youngest son (you know), experienced this first hand on our last trip down South, as he stepped on one of those curious dirt mounds in the grass and got a nasty surprise as the fire ants began to sting his bare foot. Ants are way worse than grasshoppers.

But, the old Greek storyteller, Aesop tells two different stories about ants. Like Solomon, he bids us to look to the ant as an example of hard work and industriousness. He tells the familiar story of “The Grasshopper and the Ant.” The grasshopper comes begging at the ant’s door during the winter. The ant is shocked to see the grasshopper begging and asks, “what were you doing all summer that you didn’t save up enough food for the winter?” When the grasshopper replies that he was too busy playing music to do any work, the ant replies, “well then, now you can dance.” The moral of the story is that you should plan ahead, put first things first, because hard work pays off in the end.

But, is that all there is to the story? On second glance, the ant's refusal to help the poor grasshopper seems a bit harsh and uncharitable. Aesop tells another story about the ant. There once was an ant who used to be a man. He was a farmer who was down on his luck. When his farm produced no crops, he would sneak into his neighbor's land at night and steal his produce and hide it away in his barn. Because of his thievery, Zeus sought to punish the man by turning him into an ant, which he did. But even then, after he was transformed into an ant, the man continued to steal food from other people and hoard it away in his storehouse. The moral of the story, according to the 17th cent. author Roger L'Astrange, is that "That which some call good husbandry, industry, and providence, others call raking, avarice, and oppression: So that the vertue and the vice in many cases are hardly distinguishable but by the name."

We see this as well in our Gospel lesson for today, not that ants are always bad, but that the temptation to aim for worldly success and temporary achievement may appear to be virtuous, but ultimately it is a form of idolatry that will lead a person to ruin and sadness. Christ says, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." What is mammon? It's an unfamiliar word, as it would have been to anyone in the 1st century AD who didn't speak Aramaic. Mammon can mean a few things, including 'riches' and 'wealth' but

also ‘property’ and ‘possessions’, or whatever appears to us to be something we need in order to live a full life. Christ explains that the love of Mammon causes anxiety, a certain business, an inward angst about whether we will have the right food, drink, or clothing.

Christ is talking about the bare necessities. Like the song from the Jungle Book:

Look for the bare necessities, the simple bare necessities

Forget about your worries and your strife [...]

I'll tell you something true

The bare necessities of life will come to you.

Perhaps the bear in the Jungle Book is more like our grasshopper. But, on the other hand, he's not lazy. He knows a thing or two about how to live off of the land, eating honey from the bees, letting nature serve up your meals and not worrying about things. He even has good advice about how to gather fruit. He says:

Now when you pick a paw-paw or a prickly pear

And you prick a raw paw, well, next time beware

Don't pick the prickly pear by the paw

When you pick a pear try to use the claw

But you don't need to use the claw

When you pick a pear of the big paw-paw

Have I given you a clue?

The bare necessities of life will come to you

They'll come to you!

This all might sound too silly for those of us who are too grown up to appreciate a children's song, but there is truth here. We tend to worry too much about the bare necessities and we think worrying less is foolhardy and dangerous.

Jesus says, you cannot serve both God and Mammon. "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" You cannot serve both God and Mammon. Christ knows that his Jewish audience is not tempted to literally worship idols. They don't patronize the Roman temples or burn incense to the immortal spirit of Caesar. In that way, we are like them. When was the last time you were tempted to fall down and kiss an idol to Zeus or Odin or Lord Krishna? We live in the modern world, and we were raised in a Christian society. We aren't tempted to worship idols. But, Christ is saying that there is a real temptation here for all of us.

We all know what it's like to be desperate for our basic needs. Life is hard. And is it really true that all that you need will "come to you" as the bear Baloo sang

in his song? Christ tells us something similar. He says, “look to the birds of the air,” that God himself feeds them. But what about those birds that fly into the window and die? What about the ones that the hunters kill? Mowgli the man-child was not a bear after all, and the jungle was a dangerous place for him. That’s one of the main points of the story. Look at Israel’s history of idolatry. They too were in a jungle of sorts, a wild place where no man dwells, a wilderness. And what was the first thing they were tempted to do? They were not tempted to worship idols first. Rather, if you remember the story, just after they had crossed the Red Sea, after they had walked into the wilderness for a day or so, there was no water there, and they began to complain against Moses. They complained against Moses, but as he would later tell them, “you’re not complaining against me, you’re complaining against God who sent me.” The Hebrew word for “complaint” here refers to a legal charge, a lawsuit, so that in fact the Israelites, because they did not have water or food, dared to charge God with a crime.

And yet God was merciful to them. He brought them to Elim where there were twelve wells of water, one for each tribe, and a forest of palm trees. A summary of this is found in Psalm 81 where God says, “Hear, O my people, and I will testify unto thee: O Israel, if thou wilt hearken unto me; 9 There shall no strange god be in thee; neither shalt thou worship any strange god. 10 I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt: open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it. 11 But

my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would not obey me. 12 So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels. 13 Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways! 14 I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries ... [I] should have fed them also with the finest of the wheat: and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee.”

The Israelites complained against God in the desert. Each time they lacked the bare necessities, they brought a lawsuit to the court of heaven. They longed to exchange their God for another one, whom Christ calls Mammon, and they longed for it because it seemed to them that God was not providing them with their daily bread. Here we learn an important lesson. First, we learn that we are all tempted by idolatry. The first commandment and the tenth commandment are joined together here. We covet the material things that God has not given us, and that covetous desire, the longing to fulfill the natural instinct of self-preservation, that is the beginning of idolatry. Secondly, we learn that idolatry does not always appear to be religious. There's no temple in downtown Lexington called “The Temple of Mammon” and there's no doctrine called Mammonism. And yet, when we allow our minds to be consumed with thoughts of the basic necessities, when food and clothing for ourselves and our family becomes more important, more practical, more

immediately needed than the possession of the Kingdom of God, then Christ says we have devoted ourselves to the service of a false god called Mammon.

We might appear to be industrious like the ant, working ourselves to the bone into the late hours of the night. We might seem to be care-free like the grasshopper, but inwardly we are slaves to the works of our own hands – like the idols made by the craftsman – because we give all of our care and attention to our paychecks, our retirement funds, our investment portfolios, to the fear and dread of paying the monthly bills rather than to God. But Christ says “My little children, do not worry about these things...Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” As C.S. Lewis summarized it, “aim for heaven and you get earth thrown in. Aim for earth and you get neither.”

This doesn’t mean that we don’t care about putting food on the table or doing the works of mercy: feeding the poor, clothing the naked, tending to the sick, burying the dead, and so on. In fact, it’s because we are seeking a heavenly kingdom first that we pursue all of these material things with even greater urgency, not for ourselves, but for Christ’s sake, because He clothed me when I was naked in sin and

shame, when I was guilty of exchanging the Creator God for a god of my own creation, He came to me as I was starving, and fed me with honey out of the rock. When I had lost my way, Christ found me and brought me home rejoicing over me. It's because of his great love for me that I long to discover him again in me when I love my neighbor, when I work as hard as I can so that I might save even one soul by showing them mercy. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" does not mean "forget about all these things." But rather, "Seek ye *first* [before anything else] the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Now, there is a sort of spiritual detachment that can be dangerous (perhaps the bear Baloo is an image of this) but Christ is calling us to develop what one author calls "long habit of solid repose". In order to develop that habit of repose, we must take Christ with us in every circumstance. If things are going great for you, you're living in heaven on earth, then draw Christ into each moment with songs of praise and thanksgiving. If you're experiencing the torments of hell, through pain and mental anguish, discover Christ there as well, harrowing the hell around you with the white hot fire of his almighty word, purifying your soul from within and offering you an other-worldly peace of mind, even while your body aches and your heart mourns its losses. As the hymn writer Horatio Spafford, after losing all four of his daughters in a shipwreck, with faith unfeigned, yet with tremendous sorrow of heart, he wrote:



When peace like a river, attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll;

Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say

It is well, it is well, with my soul.

For those who put their trust in Christ, there is true peace, lasting inward consolation, and a habit of solid repose, as all that we have and all that we are is wrapped up in the knowledge of Christ, that He is in us, that we are in Him and underneath us are the everlasting arms of God.

Beloved, before us is the altar of God, the memorial of God's own blood poured out, and his body broken for sinners. Here is where Christ suffered for you, and here is where he calls your restless spirits, to put away your spirit of restlessness, to repose yourself in his almighty embrace, to say to him, "Lord, it is well with my soul." Come and take the body of your Lord, that your weak and beggarly body might have the hope of the resurrection. Come and drink his blood, that your soul might be filled with the joy of knowing the God who cares for you, who brings you through trials, so that you might learn that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Taste and see that the Lord is good, receive the bread of heaven, the food of angels. O come, let us adore him, who lives and reigns eternally in the heavens, forever and ever. Amen.