**18th Per Annum, 2025**

“What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest.” Sound familiar? I don’t think you’re entirely alone if you sometimes get to the end of a working week and think ‘What was the point of all that?’

Good question. What *is* the point of ‘all that’? It’s important to ask that question, because there are wrong answers. Not only that, but we live in a world which is sellingus the wrong answers, and either hasn’t heard or doesn’t like the right answer.

Last week we talked about the Lord’s Prayer, and we noticed that Jesus has us ask only for the necessities of life – our daily bread – rather than the Lamborghinis and Chateau Lafites of our wildest dreams. This week, both Our Lord and S. Paul warn us about what we might call the besetting sin of our culture: covetousness.

What’s that? I love the Greek word for it, πλεονεχία, which captures it perfectly: ‘more-having-ness’. That’s covetousness: more-having-ness, the inveterate desire for an infinitude of goods. The all-devouring greed which is at the heart of our blighted consumerist culture. It isn’t only Gordon Gekko who thinks that greed is good.

That’s how we arrive at one of the wrong answers to our question: ‘What is all that for?’ – ‘Money’ – ‘What’s the money for?’ – ‘Things,’ – ‘what are the things for?’ – ‘happiness,’ – ‘what is happiness?’ – ‘things, more things, *all* the things.’ There’s a horrid circularity to that twisted logic, but if we aren’t careful, we can find ourselves living that way.

That’s why Jesus tells us to “Take care, and be on your guard against covetousness,” because, as S. Paul knows, covetousness isn’t just a vice – no vice is really ‘just’ a vice – it is “idolatry.” His very words: “covetousness, *which is idolatry*.” What’s idolatry? Giving to a false god, and *idol*, the worship – λατρεία – which belongs to God alone.

Hang on, you might say: isn’t that going a bit far? I know I’m fond of the finer things in life, but I don’t *worship* them. But if I build my life around things, and prioritise things over everything else, and think about things, and the money I need to get things, and getting the money to get more things, more than anything else, am I not worshipping things? Am I not infected with pleonexia, with the disease of more-having-ness?

Some of us try to be a bit like those dodgy kings of Israel, having their cake and eating it: worshipping the Lord but also keeping on the good side of the gods of the heathen round about. Not many of us – I hope! – have a little statue of Astarte or Baal tucked away in a shrine at home. But I wonder, if we could see our own souls, whether we might not have a tiny corner, at least, devoted to the false-god ‘things’? I fear that I might.

Now, don’t get me wrong, things are good: we need things. We need, and it’s reasonable to work for, food and clothing and shelter. It’s reasonable to work for the means to improve our minds, to give our minds and bodies rest and relaxation, and to celebrate and be festive with out families and friends. And because Creation *is* good, it’s right to spend some at least of our time and labour on beautiful things, good things, true things, to echo the beauty of God in the beauty of our little sub-creations.

But there are limits, and if we aren’t careful and on our guard, we might find ourselves like the rich man in the Gospel, caught on the hoof my death piling up his riches for he knows not whom, pouring out our lives in service of our possessions, of things which are certain to be taken from us. “This also is vanity.”

So how do we think our way through the temptation to covetous idolatry? Well, first we need to get our priorities straight: we need things for life, but our life is more than things. “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions,” as Jesus says.

Rightly-ordered priorities will remind us that our life is not in things, but is “hidden with Christ in God.” The rich man says to his soul “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But the soul’s food is not bodily food, but to do the will of God. The soul does not take its rest in worldly things – “even in the night his heart does not rest” – but it is restless until it rests in God. The soul’s true joy is not in “things that are on earth,” but in “things that are above,” of which earthly delights are only ever a dim echo.

S. Paul’s advice to us is hard: “Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you,” by which he does not mean that we ought to pretend not to need, or even to enjoy, the good things of God’s creation. What *does* he mean? “[…] sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” Each one an excessive desire for something, some good thing, a desire so disordered that it turns the heart from God and makes the good thing into an idol. “This also is vanity.”

We put these things to death in us by remembering what we were made for: not earthly, but heavenly life, a life which is now invisible, but which will one day shine forth in glory, when Christ shall come again. Then we will see things as they really are, and woe to us if we have been rich in things but poor in God; blessed rather, if we have restrained our desires for things – killed them! – and put God first in our hearts, and in our lives. God Who is the point of all this.

We have to do this the hard way, I’m afraid: one unruly desire, each temptation to hoard and have more and more, at a time. But we have in us something which makes that possible: a “new self.” The new self we acquired at baptism, by which we can be – if we cooperate with God’s work in us – “renewed in knowledge after the image of [our] creator.” Who created not for gain but for joy, Whose labour is never in vain, Who is all, and in all. Amen.