

Preached on Sunday 30th July 2016 at St Michael's by The Rev. Joseph Fernandes

Based on a sermon by Mark Oakley, Canon Chancellor of St Pauls Cathedral

Luke 12:13-21

Some of you will know the story of the rabbi who went to the barber's for a haircut. At the end, he went to pay but the barber wouldn't accept his money. "No, rabbi", he said, "I never take money from the clergy". And the following morning when the barber got to work there on the steps of his shop was a bag of delicious newly baked bagels. The following day a Catholic priest went for a haircut. At the end the barber wouldn't accept any money. "No father", said the barber "I never take money from the clergy". And the following morning, there on the steps the barber found a large bottle of whisky. The following day an Anglican vicar went to have his haircut. At the end the barber refused his money. "No reverend" he said "I never take money from the clergy" and the following morning there on the steps the barber found a queue of Anglican vicars.

Religion when curdled can take small opportunities to be mean instead of large opportunities to be generous. But what is being missed here is that, whilst berating religion's shadow rather than seeing its streams of light, other gods have moved into our world unnoticed and they are so strong that we are blind to their power. There are many of these gods in this day and age, but let me mention quickly just four.

The first is called **Gloss**, the goddess of beauty and surfaces – a fickle being, incarnated in paper and adverts, a god so big she makes us all feel small and ugly. We are drawn by her siren voice but her perfection is impossible even for those who anoint themselves with her many sensuous creams and labels. She is cunning too – she makes humans confuse their wants for their needs and this leads to many tears. She teaches that life is survival of the fittest. Fit for what she never reveals. She makes objects into people and people into objects so in her adverts you can never work out if the man is having an affair with the woman or with the car. Gloss desecrates human beings and this quickly leads to them doing the same.

Obese is the god of gathering, of acquiring, who is never satisfied: happiness for him is having what you want not wanting what you have. And he always wants more even when bloated. Although people say he is seen on earth at the moment in the form of bankers, in fact he is found in most hearts that have forgotten that the best things in life are not things and that there is a price to pay when everything has a price. He is related to that great god who makes us buy things we don't need called Ikea (mainly worshipped on a Saturday). Together they magic us into spending money we don't have on things we don't want in order to impress people we don't like. And because customers and consumers are always right, everything touched by his commercialism is changed in character and the values that have governed the meaning and purpose of goods are eroded all in the hope that storing up is the path to happiness. How Obese laughs as he magically allows money to turn us into people we would prefer not to be without us noticing.

Instantaneous is the goddess of now. She cannot wait. She must have fast cars, fast food, fast money, fast death. She is blind, never having the time to stop and see anything. She often gets into a mess too because she never has the patience to listen to anyone either. She beckons people to live full lives but strangely leaves them feeling empty. She is afraid of people meeting face to face in case they discover the joys of wasting time together, and so she invents screens and devices that trick us into thinking we are communicating but which

actually add to our loneliness. She seduces with easy answers, and hates ambiguity, relationship, poetry, faith, art.

And finally there is **Punch**, the god of violence and division. If hate can be escalated he'll have a go – if they don't agree with you, lash out. If they're different, slap them down. If they're not in the majority, don't invite them. When in doubt, just punch them. Now obviously Punch is the creator of some computer games, street gangs, film directors and state leaders. Religious leaders are often drawn to his clarifying power too. But also, Punch can be a subtle god and can hide in the consensus of the middle classes, and his punch can be made, not of a fist but of plausible, respectable, articulate words. Punch can be very charming as he drives around in his bandwagon. He can make you feel better even as society fragments around you. And he loves to play a little trick – he likes to make people yawn whenever the conversation turns to human responsibilities, refugees, the poor and marginalised, the environment and an endangered creation, equality, the danger of the market being its own morality – in fact, anything that Christians believe are very close to God's heart.

Let's not pretend, then, that we live in a God-free world. We are in a bedlam. The question will always be which god you have chosen to follow or maybe which god has taken hold of you. These are gods at work in the world and, yes, in the Church.

In the gospel we heard today, the man was being careful, cautious. He was being like this because of fear of losing what he had, and a desire to accumulate. What the man discovers is that the greatest risk of all is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The man was not being asked to be loyal to the past or even to the present. He was being asked to be loyal to the future. That is the Christian vocation – to transform the full stops of life into commas.

God loves us just the way we are. But he loves us so much he doesn't want us to stay like that. As in the today's gospel, God asks us become, who he has created us to become. And who we become will depend on the gods we cling to.