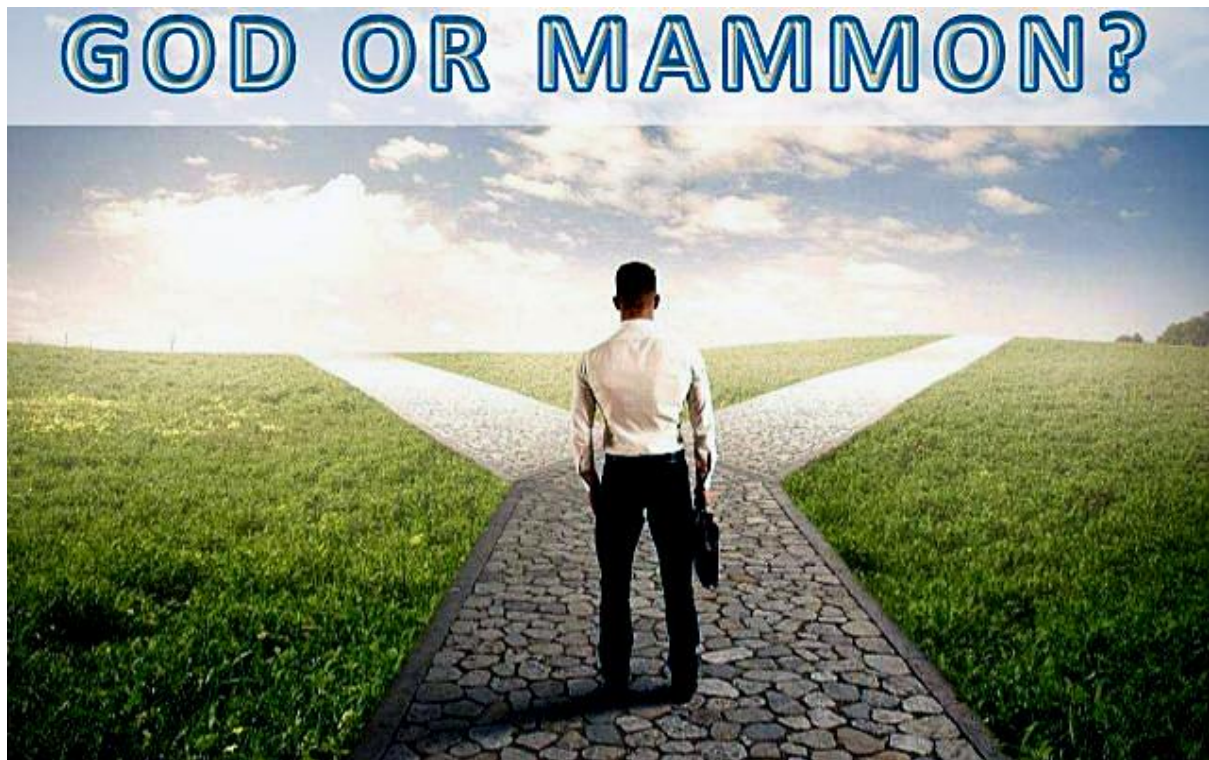


SUNDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2022: THE
TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME.



[Jesus said] no servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon. Luke 16:13

First, that word Mammon, or mammon. I'm sure, like me, you have known it for years, but where does it come from? How has it become acquainted with money? And where else do you you ever see it? Well, tracing it back through old bibles in English, then into the Greek originals, it is still mammon, with no explanation. It does strongly suggest that it is the word Jesus used, as it is the same word in his Aramaic language, māmōnā, ממונא, where it simply means money or wealth, with no connotation of evil or sin. Jesus must have seen how wealth can corrupt people, where they stray from the fundamentals of the life of grace as he saw it. It is us who have personified the simple

word into something destructive. Indeed that is the only sense today in which it is used. Mammon is quite simply, evil. But money and wealth in today's understanding are not necessarily evil. So Jesus is talking about something in our experience which can *become* evil in the way *we* view it and handle it. So this is a call to awareness and prudence. And in that light we should look at the remarkable parable Jesus presents to us today.

He describes a pretty hopeless steward managing his master's money – “squandering” is the term used. Now the master of the house does not fire this man immediately, but orders an accounting of his work and then he will let him go. Strange; I wonder how many other bosses would do that. So this incompetent fellow, not strong enough for manual labor and too proud to beg, reduces the various debts owed to his master by his customers, or whatever they are. That way, he figures, he will be welcomed by them in the future, when he is jobless and might need their help. The master, on learning this, actually congratulates the man rather than has him thrown into prison! And Jesus seems to approve of that behavior, to the confusion of our experts and theologians. They suggest, for example, that the steward had inflated the prices and interest on the charges to the master's customers in order to make a little profit for himself on the side (apparently a practice known back then – and probably even today). He was just cutting his own profit out of the equation, hence the benign reaction of the master. Could be, Jesus just does not say that. I think Jesus was looking at how “the world” deals with reality, without this time condemning it. He would like to see such shrewd practice put to work in the salvation of souls! He seems to say do not be afraid to handle dishonest wealth in the full knowledge that it could be short lived and untrustworthy (though that is just a suggestion). In that way you have not put your faith into it but rather handled it with care and discretion, and I think he uses the word “dishonest” simply because wealth is powerful enough to drag us down to sinful levels. You can never trust it. Hence his concluding remark, God or mammon?

One thought from history might help in understanding this challenging teaching. The Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, was quite successful in its efforts to spread the Christian belief in China in the 17th century. They even achieved access to the imperial court through their knowledge, especially, of astronomy. They even ran the Imperial Observatory. They were beginning to make converts even in the imperial court. In doing this, they had to accommodate to various Chinese sacred practices which upset the Dominicans, the Franciscans and even the Pope. Confucian ancestor worship was the major point of contention. The Jesuits devised a way to include this in Catholic prayer (the so-called **“Chinese Rites”**). In addition, the Jesuits were accused of flouting their own vow of poverty by wearing the silk robes required of anyone close to the emperor (which I think reflects today’s gospel teaching). They were eventually forbidden by the Vatican to engage in several of their “adaptations”, and because of this, the emperor eventually banished them from the court. It is one of the greatest “what ifs” in the history of the Catholic Church. What the Jesuits did there might be considered “dishonest” in some lights, but the greater perspective, the intention was overwhelming and perhaps even near success. You could say they were being true to their precept, *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam (AMDG), To the Greater Glory of God*. One of the great Jesuits leading this missionary work was **Matteo Ricci**.



Matteo Ricci, Xu GuangQi Memorial Hall, Shanghai, China.

The opening reading is a reminder about how wealth should be gained, honestly and without damaging those without it. So what should we focus upon? The second reading is clear on this, saying *“there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and us, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as ransom for all.”* The only wealth we need is that which will last through **all** types of good and bad times, something worldly wealth cannot do. And it is the Lord who, at the end of the day, presents us with a stark choice even after much confusion which has divided theologians (and us). So which is it for each of us: God or mammon?