

Feast of St Laurence – Church of St Laurence, South Hinksey  
11 August 2019



Wisdom 4:10-15 / Psalm 25:1-6 / 2 Corinthians 9:6-10 / John 12:24-26

Roving desire perverts the innocent mind...

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

**D**ESIRE has occupied my thoughts for the past few weeks. Not, I hasten to add, that I have been assaulted by more concupiscent thoughts than is usual for this underdressed season of summer, nor have been especially fretful about wealth, nor envious concerning other people's holidays... well, perhaps a *bit* envious about others' holidays. But more specifically, I have been neck deep in research on 'desire' in the psychological sense, and I hoped that if I promise not to spend time on my *academic* interest in desire, this indulgent parish might be patient if a preacher noticed that particular word in today's readings.

Our reading from the book of Wisdom this morning warns us against the effects of *desire*, *roving* desire (which sounds even naughtier than the sedentary kind). Here, Wisdom shares a concern with much of the Bible; although we often think first about the erotic dimension of desire, Scripture scolds people not just for roasting with longing for folks to whom they are not married; often we read about desire for meat or other tasty foods, for drink (water), desire for lazy rest, or for possessions. Nothing about this is hard to understand; if as Moses

teaches we are to honour God before all gods, before all earthly objects, our desire for flesh, for food or drink, for wealth *displaces* our desires from God and God alone, and redirects our desires toward the menu at The Old Parsonage, the cast of *Love Island*, or the bank accounts of the one percent. ‘I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt no other gods before me’ — our God wants our undivided, undiluted love, just as God offers us undivided, undiluted love.

And our *desires* try precisely to intervene between us and our love of God. ‘Mmmm, we can skip the Holy Day of Obligation, it’s a beautiful morning at the park, we can worship God in the sunshine.’ Our desires infiltrate our sense of right and wrong, so that good-hearted people begin rationalising special meetings *alone* with particular friends, and gradually ‘special friendship’ drifts into illicit intimacy and harmful, destructive sin. Our longing just to *feather our nest*, to support our family, to have a little (then a little more) of the nice things in life, that desire tricks us into thinking that the nice things in life are ours as a matter of justice. We begin to suppose that we *deserve* comfort and luxury, and our self-justification cordons us off from a due awareness of divine judgement. Desire distracts, deludes, derails us, and after a while we drift, reluctant to remember that God calls us to *undivided* loving loyalty. The *God* part of our lives gets squeezed into a cabinet in the foyer, brought out on Sunday mornings (when we find time for him) and then stuffed back into the cabinet while Desire stretches out comfortably on the drawing-room sofa.

If we try bravely to renounce desire, we won’t find any substantive support from the world around us. Desire moves the world; desire sets the agenda, serves the meals, defines the terms of the debate. Without endless, restless desire, the economy will stall. If I don’t want another, newer, flashier, advanced consumer item, the *Financial Times* will report that consumer demand has slackened. Being content with your

lot isn't enough for the marketplace; contentment means you're *against growth*. If we're not all scrabbling for more, more, and again more, why, we're practically unpatriotic!

That same roving desire takes possession of public life when it pits us against one another in the bear-baiting spirit of no-holds-barred competition. The desire to *win* at any cost drives out every last trace of the honesty, fair play, and sportsmanship that have sustained the heart of our lives together. Once partisanship takes control, no room is left for cooperation, or harmony, or patience, or *grae*; those all become signs of weakness to be exploited by the wantonly treacherous winners. St Paul encountered some of these self-serving status climbers in his ministry, so that he emphasised in this morning's lesson, as he does all the time, that the point of our life and work is to share, share abundantly and freely, so that the good things in mortal life are enjoyed by all, rather than reserved for the few — and all the more so that our common life here on earth provide a mirror in which we can see reflected the eternal life of the blessed in heaven.

Which is where St Laurence comes in. With all the wonderful works, the amazing narrative of his martyrdom, his extraordinary sanctity of life, about all of which you have heard year in and year out on this patronal feast day, St Laurence turned his back on desire for security, for advancement, for riches. You don't need me to remind you: when the officers of the persecuting empire came and demanded from him the treasures of the church, Laurence gathered and brought with him his broken, outcast, disabled, neglected, and impoverished sisters and brothers. 'These here are the church's eternal treasures, which cannot depreciate, but only always grow greater,' he said. Laurence understood that the treasures of the church are lives made whole rather than vessels of gold and silver; he remembered the words of the Lord, how he warned that it profits us nought to gain the whole world, if in so

doing we allow our desire for worldly things to corrode our souls.

I do not expect the constables to come round and demand our chalices and candlesticks, nor for Fr Richard *or the churchwarden* or me to be arrested and barbecued in the town square. But so many forces in the world around us *do* expect us to play along with their get-ahead, ends justify means, winner-take-all burgeoning, roving desires; I know that the sun will not set before each of us confronts an advert seducing us to long for more, or a political voice pointing us toward limitless growth. Confronted by the spirit of Desire, we pray this morning that St Laurence will come to our hearts as a reminder that the path that follows Christ leads us by way of renunciation, that sacrifice triumphs over desire, and that dented and tarnished as we may be, we are being made perfect by grace through our unwavering loyalty to God. St Laurence recognises us as treasures of the church, and presents us as such before the only and eternal King.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen**