

Proper 13 / 7 Trinity Year C – St Michael and All Angels, Abingdon
3 August 2025



Colossians 3.1–11 / Luke 12.13–21

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

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

DON'T GET OVEREXCITED, EVERYONE. I'm not going to preach in salacious detail about the multiple categories of sins about which we hear in this morning's lesson from Colossians. Instead, I propose to preach about *idolatry*, a sin that very few people own up to committing these days. Indeed, I suppose that very few people even have a clear idea of how they *might* fall into idolatry. If there's a Temple of Apollo nearby, nobody has told me about it. If Christ Church in Oxford sells its magnificent cattle for sacrificial offerings, they haven't invited me to their annual Saturnalia. We seem almost to feel *immune* to idolatry, and when we start to feel as though we're *immune* to a sin, we've come dangerously close to stumbling near-sightedly into the slippery abyss of transgression.

It's difficult even to *imagine* idolatry in England, 2025. We don't see the Market Square crowded with marble altars and gilded statues; even Queen Victoria has relocated to the Abbey Gardens, and much as we may love our nineteenth-century queen, nobody today would confuse her with a goddess. Perhaps it would help if we started by thinking of the cults of the gods as different *charities* we might support, each with its

own mascot. We can support multiple different charities, because they're not mutually exclusive. If you support the Royal British Legion in November, you can still support Pride with a Rainbow badge in the summer, and Red Nose Day in the spring. In the same way, you could have made sacrifices to Athena before your children sat their exams, and Fortuna if you bought a ticket for Euromillions, and to Venus (the summit of beauty and love) if you wanted to get a date. (Some of us might have needed Fortuna *and* Venus for a date....) But in other ways, the idols might be more like Stamford the Lion for Chelsea, and Gunnersaurus for Arsenal, with a degree of active personal involvement with the club and the public. (My own favourite mascot is Partick Thistle's Kingsley, who looks like the morning sun but with a vicious hangover.) You didn't so much *believe in* Gunnersaurus as you cheer for Arsenal, and take the friendly dinosaur as part of being a supporter. *But* — and this is a big difference from my football metaphor — you and I would *never* ordinarily say, 'Oh, I support Chelsea and Arsenal *both*', whereas when it came to Greco-Roman gods and cults, it was the more the merrier.

Now to steer this back to Colossians, Scripture doesn't worry about idolatry because St Paul or Jesus or Moses bore a prejudice against theological *mascots*. Even St Paul partly acknowledges idols when he tells the Corinthians that *everyone* knows there are many gods and many Lords. The difficulty arises when you let the mascot of your football team take priority over your faith in the One God, Lord of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, and so on. In comparison to the Creator, Gunnersaurus and Red Poppies and even Kingsley are nothing, less than nothing. But often enough we allow other Lords to govern our lives in ways that we forget to allow our Saviour to govern us. Not that doing your catch-up shop, or going to the football match on Sunday amounts to disowning Jesus and boundless love and grace for us — but if

we casually make one excuse after another for skipping church, for overlooking our religious obligations, that habit itself can quickly insinuate itself into all our decision-making. We justify ignoring the easy parts of living out our faith, and then when we encounter the trickier bits (such as those from this morning's lesson: greed, impurity, a bad temper, evil desire, and yes, fornication), when we run into lures to indulge in gluttony, or envy, or lust, we've lowered our resistance to those temptations. *That* way, allowing mixed allegiance to God and to idols rapidly devolves to picking and choosing whatever sounds like a bit of fun — and that usually doesn't include things like, oh, denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus, or even just everyday humility, prudence, temperance, or faithfulness.

Most of the time, idolatry didn't — still doesn't — involve a direct connection to naughtiness. *Most* of the time, the idols weren't whispering to their followers to go out and commit actual bodily harm in order to extract a by-passer's purse or wallet from them, or to locate the nearest willing partner to engage in some lustful self-indulgence. Most of the time, idolatry boils down to making the same sensible decisions that the rest of the world would make, like our farmer in this morning's parable who gets out his Excel spreadsheet and calculates the difference between what he'll be bringing in at harvest time, and how much room is left in his barn, and how that affects his long-range projections. Thousands of people go to the City to do that every day, and we don't stop them and say 'You fools! This very night your souls will be demanded of you!' I will admit before you all this morning that for fifty years or more, I have committed exactly this transgression in the name of sound financial planning for retirement.

Now, hardly anybody would dare to call Sound Financial Planning a sin, and especially not an idol (a boring idol, though, a grey flannel idol with a briefcase and mountains of maths), but Jesus recognises the way

that behaviour that looks *sensible* in the eyes of the Earthly City tends to lure us away from storing up treasures in the City of God. One *can* deal responsibly with money *and* share generously with our sisters and brothers, but the habit of market idolatry makes it harder, hard indeed.

Now, though, clothed with our new, heavenly self, we can work to develop the habit, the way of life, whereby we set aside the idols of the market square and cultivate the habits that draw us closer to God. We can relegate Gunnersaurus and Red Noses, and promote our faith in Jesus. We can do all these things in the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us; we can, and with God's grace, we will.

✙ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—

Amen