

May 26, 2019

*Revelation 21:22* I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God"

### **Worshipping the Lesser Gods**

Of course, "worship God." What an easy command. There is nothing difficult or ambiguous about it. As a lifelong Christian mono-theist I certainly know that my life is bound to the words "worship God!" But, (and in real life there is always a "but") in practice I am a polytheist – I act in such a way as to show the world that I work at the altar of many gods. There are the three great secular gods: Power, Wealth and Ego. Most of us recognize the dangers posed by worshipping at those shrines. If we survive middle age without allowing them to devour us we thank the real God and move on.

It is the lesser gods who bedevil us in our middle and later years. The gods of *comfort, acceptance and control*. I found it easy to do the research on these gods. All I had to do was to look in the mirror. The mirror is a truth teller, early in the morning before I've had my coffee. The first thing that I discover is that the thirty-five year old living in my brain has totally deserted my body. It is while commiserating with myself over this loss that I discover that I am in thrall to the lesser gods. While you are too young to share my mirror trauma, it just might be that you too find yourself worshipping at the altar of comfort, acceptance and control.

**Comfort** is the most insidious of the lesser gods. Like the real God, it comes in a Trinitarian form. The physical form is the one we know best. I may not be as bad as my mother who thought that God and carpeting were co-equal, but I do admit to genuflecting to my air conditioner. It has been many years since I thought it was fun to sleep on the ground in the Australian outback. Today I lust after a sleep by number mattress.

At another level is the notion of being psychologically comfortable. I tend to be around people who agree with me on most social issues. I tolerate political differences, but please, if you must listen to popular music make it from the sixties or earlier. Being elderly is stressful enough, do I really want to add your stress burdens to mine?

Much the same is true of spiritual comfort. I certainly am interested in your philosophy of life, just don't rub me the wrong way – and increasingly I find anything non-Episcopalian, to be the wrong way. If the spiritual practice is familiar, easy and safe I find it comfortable. In many cases, I am more concerned with the way you practice your faith than I am with what your faith may be.

Enough with comfort as a false god, let us turn to **acceptance**. It is to adults what popularity is to many teenagers; a value to be desired for its' own sake. Do we temper our opinions; moderate our voice, tone down our beliefs because they might bother other people? More importantly, do we stay silent because we don't want to be thought odd or different or disruptive? In our quest to be liked, do we set aside other values? Do I forgo saying grace in public because I don't want to draw attention to myself? Is my desire to be liked, concealing the real me? What price acceptance?

Our third lesser god is my personal favorite: **Control**. I value control so much that it may edge out the major secular gods of power, wealth and ego in my personal life. My only discomfort about flying, other than the seats, is that I am not the pilot. When I was teaching, I used to resent the dean if he walked down *my* hall in *my* building. I have no authority problem, as long as I am the authority. And it is not just the minutia of life that I want to control. I want to be in charge of illness, life and death as well. While I would never utter such a blasphemy, I like to think that I am god: That I do have control.

I suspect that I am not the only one who pays homage to the lesser gods. Although they may be lesser gods, they do wreak major havoc. Let us note that there is nothing inherently wrong with comfort, acceptance and control. Just like their major counter-parts, power, wealth and ego, they have no evil implicit in their character. When we use comfort, acceptance and control as social and psychological tools to build relationships and to keep us spiritually healthy, we are doing well. It is only when we take these notions to the extreme that we end up allowing these lesser gods to distract us from dealing with real problems. They create an environment in which everything is all about ME. These lesser gods, when combined and allowed to rule, take all of the negative energy of rugged individualism and lets it run its' evil course.

Essentially, these lesser gods become barriers between ourselves and the real God. When John fell down and began worshipping at the feet of the angel, he was quickly reprimanded. He was directed to keep his worship for God. From time to time we fall prey to the seductive sirens of the lesser gods and fall down and worship them. Whatever our morning mirror reveals to us, one thing is certain: We are not God. Comfort, Acceptance, Control. All fine goals so long as we see them as adjuncts to a spiritual life and not a substitute. Lesser gods are a lesser evil, but still an evil. God help us to worship reality. Amen.