The three lessons that were read today have at least one point in common: each lesson emphasizes an unavoidable choice that must be made between God and something or someone perceived to be God's competitor. In Psalm 146, for example, the psalmist urges us to put our trust in God rather than in princes or other human authorities. God alone is the unfailing source of justice. Princes, even good princes, can only guarantee justice for as long as they live. Eventually, they breathe their last breath and return to dust. God's justice, however, transcends all human limitations. God deals out justice to the oppressed in every generation.

The gospel lesson repeats the familiar story of a trap that was set for Jesus by the Pharisees. They wanted to catch Jesus out in a damaging political indiscretion. They wanted him either to deny the right of Caesar to collect taxes (thus getting Jesus in political difficulty with the occupying Roman authorities) or to affirm that Caesar had every right to Jewish taxes (thus alienating many of Jesus' own followers). Jesus takes a coin with the image of Caesar stamped on it and utters the familiar words: Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The state has certain legitimate rights that must be respected; but so does God. We must never make the mistake of giving to the state (or to any human authority of whatever kind) a loyalty and obedience that belongs to God alone.

In the background of what Jesus is saying we can hear the echoes of Psalm 146.

The epistle lesson, on which I want to focus, appears at first glance to be somewhat different from the Old Testament and gospel lessons. The epistle lesson contains the opening paragraphs from a
letter which St. Paul wrote in A.D. 51 from Corinth in Greece to Thessalonica in Macedonia. Unlike many of Paul's letters, this epistle spends more time talking about Christian morals (what to do) than about Christian doctrine (what to believe). Christians live in the interval between the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and the coming of Christ in glory. The letter focuses on the question of the kind of life it is appropriate for Christians to live as they look backward in faith to Easter and forward in hope to the Last Judgment.

In the final verses (vv. 8-10) of the epistle lesson the connection of this passage with Psalm 146 and Matthew 22 becomes clear. The Thessalonians are described as a people who have made an absolutely crucial decision for God and against God's rivals: “From Thessalonica the word of the Lord rang out; and not in Macedonia and Achaia alone, but everywhere your faith in God has reached men's ears. No words of ours are needed, for they themselves spread the news of our visit to you and its effect: how you turned from idols, to be servants of the living and true God, and to wait expectantly for the appearance from heaven of his Son Jesus, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus our deliverer from the terrors of judgment to come.”

The Thessalonians have "turned from idols, to be servants of the living and true God." On the face of it, that seems a little remote from our world. We do not sacrifice a white bullock at the opening session of our senate or at the inauguration of a new president, though there are religious ceremonies of a vaguely ecumenical kind. Our admirals do not cast a horoscope or examine the entrails of goats before escorting a convoy of tankers into the Persian Gulf. An airline passenger who poured part of his or her drink into the aisle as a libation to the gods would be thought to be already drunk or suffering the first symptoms of a nervous breakdown. Paganism in the sense in which Paul is talking about it is a religious world view that has disappeared from our world so long ago that we can barely remember it. However you want to describe Christians in our world, you can hardly describe them as
people who have turned from idols to serve the living and true God. 

If anything seems characteristic of our world, it is not the service of many gods--from Isis and Osiris to Mercury and Athena--but the service of no god at all. Atheism and not polytheism molds the spirit of the age in which we live. God has no serious rivals in our world. God is simply denied--or, if denial seems intolerant and therefore socially unacceptable, ignored. In a world dedicated to the increase of gross national products and the lowering of international trade imbalances--in short, in a world dedicated to the proposition that men and women do live by bread alone--there is little place for religion and even less place for God. If St. Paul were writing to the church at Thessalonica in the last third of the twentieth century, he would congratulate them for turning from atheism and agnosticism to the service of the living and true God.

Or would he?

My theology teacher, the late Carl Michelson, was invited to speak at a Religious Emphasis Week at a church-related liberal arts college. A young woman stopped him as he was crossing the campus and told him that, as far as she was concerned, all of this god-talk was pointless. "I have no need of a god," she said. "Oh," replied Michelson, "what are you currently living by?"

From the standpoint of the Bible, our predicament is not that we have no god, but that we have put our trust in the wrong god. There is some person, some value, some promise in which we have put our faith and from which we derive the meaning of our life. The problem is usually not the value itself. Love of family, love of work, love of country are all values that have a legitimate place in human life. Someone who has no love at all for family or work or country is surely irresponsible and quite probably a scoundrel. Show me a physician or lawyer who is unwilling to make sacrifices to achieve the highest professional standards and I will show you a physician or lawyer that you and I will elect not to patronize.
Idolatry is not the service of legitimate human values. Idolatry is the elevation of a relative and temporal human value to the status of a value that is absolute and eternal. We are not idolaters because we work hard or because we love our families and friends or because we have a hobby that we pursue passionately. We are idolaters when we give to our families or careers or country the devotion that belongs to God alone. Whatever we treat as God, as Martin Luther pointed out, is God for us. Whatever we put in the place of God, however noble or praiseworthy it may be, is nevertheless an idol.

There are three characteristics of idols that are worth noting: (1) it requires no courage at all to serve them, since the society to which we belong is partial to idols; (2) idols invariably remake their worshippers in their own image; and (3) idols make glowing promises they cannot keep. Perhaps I can illustrate these three characteristics best if I talk for a moment about the world in which I live, the world of the university.

Universities are dedicated, at least in principle, to the acquisition of new knowledge and the lively interpretation of old. In order to achieve these twin goals, faculty need to hold themselves to high academic standards. Since the best researchers are not always the most industrious, universities and university-related professional societies have developed an elaborate system of rewards and punishments to keep often brilliant but sometimes slothful professors on the straight and narrow path of productivity. Prizes, offices in professional societies, lectureships, promotions, invitations to more prestigious universities, flattering or unflattering gossip, book reviews, fellowships, all conspire to advance the talented and productive and to weed out the mediocre and unproductive. That at least is the theory.

What the university is designed to promote is a human good. Whatever their failings, no one is prepared to suggest that universities ought to be abolished or their scale of values suppressed. But
the university in its pursuit of legitimate human values also creates an atmosphere in which an idolatrous and illegitimate religion flourishes. It is a religion that pegs human worth to intellectual achievement. The god who rules academe is a god who judges you solely by the intellectual works you have done. Moreover, this god has no memory at all. The only question he asks you--and he asks it over and over again every semester--is what have you done for me lately? You are worth to this god what you do; exactly that and no more.

Worshippers of this god are marked by two characteristics: (1) an anxious self-preoccupation (is my c-v long enough? is my list of books and articles longer than the list of Professor Y?) and (2) an equally self-preoccupied snobbery (thank heavens that I am not like Professor X, whose c-v barely covers two pages!). Of course, the service of this deity is not without its rewards: professional advancement, notoriety (at least within the limited circle of one's peers and colleagues), even, perhaps, the popularity of one's courses among the student population. But there is no sadder sight at a professional meeting than a long-retired professor, whose day is past and whose books and articles are no longer read, who moves wraithlike down the halls of the convention hotel, looking for younger colleagues to lionize him, to whom he can repeat the past and faded glories of his c-v, a shadow in a world of bright substances, the tired worshipper of a god who always disappoints, who cannot remember what is not current and who does not care.

What marks a Christian is conversion from idols to the service of the true and living God. When we talk about conversion, we usually have in mind an act, a decisive moment in time in which we switched directions. That was certainly the view of conversion stressed by early Methodist preachers, when they set out by horseback to evangelize the American frontier. They preached for a decision by emphasizing the judgment of God against sin in the law and the offer of pardon and grace in the gospel. The Thessalonian Christians undoubtedly made a conscious decision of this kind, rejecting the
idolatry in which they had been raised and embracing the promises of the gospel preached by Paul.

But there is another aspect of conversion that needs to be stressed with equal force. Conversion is not only an act; it is also a process. Turning from idols to the living God seems like the work of a moment. But it is only after I have turned from lesser gods, after I have dedicated myself to the service of the living and true God, that I discover how deeply embedded in my life and personality the old attitudes and loyalties are. The longer I am converted, the better I see how superficial my first conversion was and how badly I need to be converted again. The Church is the community of the half-converted, turned from idols and still turning.

The good news—and that is the note on which I want to conclude—is that the God to whom the Thessalonians have converted is utterly reliable. While idols are unreliable and leave their worshippers in the lurch, the living and true God whom Paul preaches is no disappointment.

Paul calls God living, not only in the sense that God is alive (idols, after all, can be uncomfortably lively and energetic), but also in the sense that God is the source of all life. That is why Paul lays such stress in his letter on the resurrection. God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead; he will raise us as well. Unlike the idols God has the power to do what he promises. Unlike the idols God never forgets any promises he makes.

Paul calls God true, not only in the sense that God is authentically God, in contrast to the idols, who are not divine at all, but also in the sense that God is faithful. God keeps the promises he makes, never abandons his worshippers in their distress, and can be counted upon to be faithful to them even when there seems to be no earthly reason he should be.

Someday a funeral procession will go to a cemetery and after a brief ceremony, everyone will go home except me. At that moment, the vain and threadbare claim of the idols to be the final
arbiters of human destiny will be shown up as the poor and empty thing it is. Only God can be God; only God has the power and the will to be God. Whatever claims to be God but is not God will abandon us one final time at the grave's edge. On that day the only question that will matter is whether underneath us are the everlasting arms of the living and true God.