

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

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Exodus 32:1-14 Golden Folly

The youth of today...

We often lament that the youth of today are characterised by several attitudes which older generations find difficult to accept or even to understand, since it undermines the values they grew up with.

Firstly, they want everything now. The present moment is all they live for, so anything which has a longer-term pay-back is not of interest. They live in a world of instant messaging, being able to stay in touch wherever they are at the press of a button – or indeed the lightning-fast press of several dozen buttons to send a cryptic SMS text message. They live in a world where research for a school project takes a few minutes on the internet, instead of hours or days pouring over books.

Then, they are heavily influenced by their peers. Few if any are bold enough to stand out from the crowd, so they wear the same style of clothes, have the same haircut, follow the same sports, hate the same teachers and love the same pop idols.

And thirdly, they are obsessed with pleasing themselves. Hedonism is taken to new limits, typified on the one hand by the trend for a “gap year” where they can basically have a year's holiday between school and university or university and a job; and on the other, by promiscuity which has reached such a level that “virgin” is now a term of contempt.

This is not the world of other people's children, it is the world of our own; a world with values so profoundly counter to Christian values that it would take super-human effort to remain true to our faith in all areas of our lives.

Yet look a little closer and you will see that this is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the very same pressures were faced by the Israelites as they enjoyed their new-found freedom from slavery. And as we see in tonight's passage, they did not fare so well either.

When the cat's away

While things were exciting, they were happy enough to tow God's line. A regular stream of miracles kept their attention. But when Moses had disappeared up a mountain covered by foreboding cloud for over a month, they quickly became impatient for some more excitement. For all they knew, Moses might never return. Why should they hang around waiting, when there was lots of life to live?

All but the youngest of the people would have spent their formative years in Egypt, a land full of pagan gods, each and every one of whom was represented by idols of some sort, often in the form of an animal. Such gods were easier to visualise than Jehovah, who could never be seen, indeed who could never be approached for fear of being killed. If only they had an impressive idol like those in Egypt, and come to that in every other land they knew of; then they would be able to keep their concentration. Why did they have to be different from everybody else?

Further more, the worship that everyone else took part in was more indulgent than the way Moses instructed them to worship God. Other men used to look forward to their religious festivals, not just for the wine and the song, but for the women – since the sex-act was positively encouraged as part of the fertility rights of pagan religion. Why should they live such straight-laced lives when they could *really* enjoy themselves?

Seducing Aaron

With such pressures bearing down on them, and no strong leadership to keep them on the straight and narrow, they fall into idolatry.

Although they could have gone behind Aaron's back and made their own idol anyway, they approach him to make one for them. Clearly his position as High Priest, and brother of this missing fellow Moses, was respected to some extent in the camp. Maybe their intention was to make an image of Jehovah, and so who better to do so than Jehovah's priest? It is difficult to make out whether they were wanting to follow other gods, or to follow God in a different way. In the end, either is just as bad as the other: there is only one God, and only one way to him.

We might have expected more of Aaron. At the very least, he could have tried to talk them out of it – but no such protest is recorded. Maybe they had lured him by flattery and even jealousy – “We don't need that jumped up little brother of yours to lead us. You can be our leader, you are much more in tune with the people than Moses, you lived all your life in slavery with the rest of us. You can take your rightful place as our leader, but the people will only follow you if they see that you are able to reveal God to them just as much as Moses. What better way than to make an idol for us, an image of God which you create from your greater knowledge of him? That would demonstrate your power, and the people would love the chance to worship as they used to be allowed to worship in Egypt. The only one to loose out would be Moses, but he's not here anyway.”

So Aaron foolishly goes along with their plan. He of all people should have known that this was not right, but I guess he was not strong enough to stand alone against the people. Although I suspect he would not have been alone, as the silent majority would probably have waited longer for Moses before adopting such a radical change of direction.

But, as Edmund Burke is reputed to have said, all that it needs for evil to triumph is for good men to stay silent; and no voices of protest were heard. Aaron then sets about making them an idol from their gold jewellery – jewellery gathered from the wives and children of the men who campaigned for the idol, but no mention is made that they themselves had to give up their favourite trinkets!

The golden folly

There is great excitement in the camp as the idol is made, and fashioned into the shape of a calf – or, to be more accurate, a bullock. Such an animal was a symbol of strength and of fertility, as it still is in Hindu India today. At last the people had their very own idol, which they could worship in their very own way; though predictably the idol was really much the same as everyone else's, and they worshipped in the same way everybody else worshipped their gods.

On the one hand, it is understandable that Israel should behave in this way. It is no more than the fruit of our human nature, and we see the same nature being worked out in the lives of the youth of today – and, if we are honest enough to admit it, in the lives of the youth of yesterday too.

Yet on the other hand, their actions were inexcusable. After all God had done for them, after the explicit and reasonable rules he had given them, after their willing, even enthusiastic, renewal of their side of the covenant, it was an act of gross betrayal, something they knew was wrong, they knew went directly against God's commands, but went ahead with anyway.

God tests Moses

Of course, while the golden calf was incapable of being aware that it was the centre of a pagan cult, the true and living God was well aware that his people had turned from him to worship a senseless calf. He is rightly and righteously angry with his people, and is about to blot them all out, save for Moses who was with him up the mountainside.

He makes Moses an offer which seems too good to be true – that God will make *his* descendants into a great nation, instead of the unfaithful and rebellious Israelites.

Note how God refers to them: as Moses people, whom Moses led out of Egypt! It is as though God were already disowning the people whom he had chosen.

Now this is a real test for Moses, a defining moment in his life. God has offered him a blessing the same as he had offered Abraham more than 400 years before. He could go down in history as the father of the people of God. It would be one thing for Moses to suggest this to God; but for God to command him to take it, well, wouldn't it be disobedient to turn it down?

Yet at the same time, Moses had come to know God pretty well over these last years, and particularly I expect over these last 40 days up the mountain. He knew his character, yes his holiness, but also his love for the people of Israel. Would he have gone to all this trouble, only to kill them out here in the desert? Would his purpose be served when the Egyptians got to hear of it, and forever more he would be known as the God who slayed his own people?

So Moses dares to argue with God. Had Moses been less of a shepherd to Israel, had he loved them less, had he, in fact, had less of God's own heart in him, then maybe he would have gone along with God's suggestion. But here he passes the test, he proves that he has understood God's purposes, that he is not following God blindly without thinking, but is following God wholeheartedly, humbly, and with his mind too.

You see, it is all very well for Moses to lead the people when he can take every decision back to God. It's all very well for Moses to tell the people where to go and what to do, when all he is doing is repeating parrot-fashion what God has told him to say. But that would not be enough for the task ahead, where Moses would need to use his own judgement in how to deal with the people as they constantly rebelled in the desert.

What more difficult test for Moses, than to see if he is prepared to argue with God when God appears to be acting against his own best interests. And Moses passes with flying colours, in stark contrast to his brother Aaron.

Of course, this is not a case of one person bringing another back to their senses. Just as when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, in contradiction of his own standards, here God is testing Moses to see how he will react.

Almost in hell

There is a little more here, something very sobering that we should not forget. God was angry at their sin, angry enough to destroy them. He is so offended by sin that no sinner can stand before him. The wages of sin is death, and the Israelites deserved their pay. Had Moses not intervened on their behalf, both now and later on when Israel rebelled again, then maybe they would have been obliterated. But what is certain is that if Jesus had not intervened on our behalf, then we would all be without hope before God's righteous anger.

We don't often think what a close escape we have from hell; we don't often realise just how offensive we are in God's site, just how much he hates even the little sins that we are content to put up with in our lives. Our sin might not be as dramatic as worshipping a golden calf; but if we search our hearts we will see other areas where we have been impatient, where we have succumbed to the influence of the world around us, where we have been enticed by the pleasure that this world seems to offer.

For in truth we are, in our own natures, every bit as stiff-necked as the Israelites of old. Which of us have gone on from some spiritual high, to come crashing down by forgetting God is with us in some difficult situation a few days later? Who amongst us finds it difficult to avoid the materialistic rat-race around us, and so spends much more time and attention on our own comforts than the comforts of those around us?

On the one hand, it is reassuring to know that we are not alone, that we are not the only people to fail to live up to the standards we know we ought to. On the other hand, we do well to remember that God is never content with any sin in our lives, and that he wants us to become increasingly more holy as we go through our lives.

Modern idolatry

In view of this, how are we to apply the concern about idolatry today? We are not likely to be tempted to melt down our gold to fashion an image of a calf so we can worship it. So is idolatry an out-of-date sin, or do we need to beware of modern equivalents?

Well, opinions vary on this, of course. At one extreme, there are those who say that any symbol or image is an idol. Even the cross itself is actually an idol, because we have its image in our mind as we worship, instead of the thought of God himself. Any image purporting to be of Christ is idolatry, whether in a Sunday School play, or in Gibson's "Passion" film.

Perhaps it is idolatrous to follow football with a passion, whether at club or national level. Many people do give great adulation to their favourite players, and collect and display various symbols of the team they follow. Are those England flags we see on car windows idols, and did those who stayed at home last Sunday to watch the football commit idolatry?

To try to reach a conclusion, let's see what God says in his own word:

Firstly the command in Exodus 20:4:

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Next Samuel speaking to Saul after he has disobeyed God's rules-of-engagement in battle [1 Sa 15:22-23]:

*²² But Samuel replied:
 "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
 as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD?
 To obey is better than sacrifice,
 and to heed is better than the fat of rams.
²³ For rebellion is like the sin of divination,
 and **arrogance like the evil of idolatry.**
 Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
 he has rejected you as king"*

Then Ezekiel condemning idolaters [Eze 14:3-5]:

*"Son of man, these men have set up **idols in their hearts** and put wicked stumbling-blocks before their faces. Should I let them enquire of me at all? ⁴ Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling-block before his face and then goes to a prophet, I the LORD will answer him myself in keeping with his great idolatry. ⁵ I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.'*

And finally Paul [Col 3:5]:

*⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and **greed, which is idolatry.***

The fact that we are not to make images of God tells us that God is not part of the creation; no image of things in air, land or sea can capture what he is like, he is above and beyond the created realm. To focus our attention on any physical object distracts us from the truth – and that includes the cross, if it does become a distraction. We are to live by faith, not by sight – faith being the distinguishing feature between those who truly believe, and those who do not.

The symbol itself can become the reality in our hearts. You see, the essence of idolatry is putting something else in God's place, putting our trust in something or someone else, besides God.

So arrogance is like idolatry. If you are proud that you have never worshipped any God except Jehovah, then are you really saying that you deserve to be with God because of what you have done? Do you see that arrogance is a destructive thing? It places too much importance on ourselves and our abilities, when really we should be trusting in God.

Greed, Paul says, is idolatry. In what ways does greed put other things before God?

Well, in one sense it is obvious – if we want to have something more than we want to have God, then that is clearly idolatry. If we want to watch football more than we want to worship God, then that is a bad thing. Now this does not mean that we can never miss a Sunday service, for whatever reason. It is a question of attitude and priority, one which you need to search your own heart for.

When Abigail came into my study after the morning service today, and wanted a piece of the chocolate I got for Father's day, that was greed. But was it idolatry? By taking a piece of chocolate, Abigail was hardly putting the chocolate before God. Just as by extending our house, we were not putting our home before Him. But it is possible for these things to become idols, if we place our confidence in them.

If we look to food for comfort when we should be looking to God, then that is a form of idolatry. If we think that our larger house is a status symbol which gives us more prestige in the community, then that too is a form of idolatry.

Nothing before God

Part of the reason Israel went after the Baals was in an attempt to secure a good harvest, and thus to ensure their survival and prosperity. Rather than trust in God alone for this, they followed the practices of the other people around them – often trying to combine Baal worship with worship of the Lord. The same root desire can be at the heart of greed too – if we think our lives will be more secure or pleasurable if we only had such-and-such.

See what you think of what this commentator says:

“Every time an Israelite sacrificed to Baal he was depending upon Baal to provide what he wanted and believed he needed in order to live. Every time someone today sacrifices time and energy toward education, social status, possessions, etc. he is depending upon Education, Work, Social Status, Reputation to provide what he believes he needs to take care of him. The names are the only difference between ancient and modern idolatry.”

Now there is nothing inherently wrong with education, social status and possessions. Come to that, there is nothing inherently wrong with golden calves either. It is the *purpose* for which we use them which counts. If your sense of security in life comes from your salary and pension fund, then that is your idol. If your hearts desire is to see England win Euro 2004, then that is yours.

The challenge to avoid idolatry is more tricky than it first seems; but it can be met. The trick is not to pay so much attention to whatever else attracts us in life, but to pay attention to God, and indeed to the help he gives us to stay faithful to him. As we do so, we will see everything else in its correct perspective. We will be able to pursue a career without treading on others to get to wherever we get to – whether that is the top or the bottom of the greasy pole. We will be able to enjoy a game of football without hating the opposition or feeling devastated when we loose, because it is only a game. And above all, we will be able to worship God in spirit and in truth, because we know that He alone is the Lord of our lives, He alone is able to save us from ourselves, and our destiny is to be with him.