

Golden Calves

Exodus 32:7 - 14

Psalm 51

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Over the last few years I've visited many of you at home. I don't do an inventory of your living rooms but I'm pretty confident that none of you had a golden calf on your mantelpiece. And from what I know of you I'm willing to bet you don't have one hidden away in an upstairs bedroom or in attic. Golden calves aren't really in fashion. So we might conclude that today's Old Testament reading doesn't really have much to say to us. We are not quite like the ancient Israelites. We just don't worship golden calves.

But in fact the golden calf doesn't matter much in itself. The golden calf is a symbol. In fact it's a very important symbol for Moses because what made the Jewish faith different from most other faiths was that they didn't have images of God at all. Images were specifically prohibited in the Ten Commandments; the Israelites quite simply felt that they were unhelpful, partly because such images were associated with the other religions but also because they believed that images in themselves were unhelpful. That distinction between religions continues in our own time. Muslims, who are in many ways descended from the Jews, are even more strict about images: they tend not to have even personal photographs on display in their homes. And even we as Christians, despite our many statues of the saints and Jesus, himself have no images of God the Father.

Why can this be? Let's go back to a rather famous Old Testament story. The story of the burning bush. (Exodus 3) You are probably quite familiar with the account of how Moses, caring for the sheep on the hills came across a bush that was on fire. What was rather curious was that despite the fire the bush is not burned up. Moses goes to investigate and he hears the voice of God speaking from the bush, calling him to a key role in rescuing his people from slavery to Pharaoh. At the end of the conversation Moses makes a request of God. 'Tell me your name' he says. 'I need to give my people your name'. From our perspective it is a slightly odd request. 'God' has

become for us a proper name, with a capital 'G'. However, Moses and his contemporaries understood that every tribe had their gods and gods needed names to distinguish them from other gods. But the god of the burning bush, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob gives a rather cryptic reply. He says 'I am who I am.'

His words, originally written of course in Hebrew, are the origin of the word 'Yahweh' or the rather better known 'Jehovah' as in Jehovah's Witnesses or 'Guide me oh thou great Jehovah'.

Of course it feels like God is playing games! 'I am who I am tells us nothing'. And in a sense that is quite deliberate. What God is saying is that he is not just another god amongst the gods. And what is more his nature (or do I mean her nature?) cannot be caught in human language. We have a natural tendency to want to pin God down. We want to say that he is a father, or a judge, or a friend, or a brother, or a mother, or a sister. What the author of Exodus is telling us is that God is none of these. He is not part of creation, he is not part of the world, what is more he is not like anything else in all creation. There is a strong tradition in the Christian faith that we cannot say anything about God at all. God is not to be discussed, God is not to be talked about or written about, God is quite simply to be experienced.

But of course we do talk about God. Preachers talk about God! Theologians talk about God. We speak of God as the ultimate foundation of everything; God is in all, through all, below all, above all. In the words of Saint Paul he is 'immortal, invisible'.

And sometimes there has been discussion in the Christian church about who may properly study theology. If theology is the study of God, can you study God if you don't believe in him? This has led to a quite proper distinction between theology and religious studies. Religious studies is the study of a human phenomenon, related to sociology, history or psychology. But theology is the study of someone whom many members of our society believe does not exist.

Let us assume that it is quite legitimate for those of us who do believe in God to talk about him. To study him. But we need to bear in mind

that being with God is more important than studying him. Talking to God takes priority over talking about God. But if we give a priority to talking about God, if we make the Christian faith an intellectual or academic exercise, then we are building for ourselves a golden calf.

Perhaps this is why Jesus put so much store in the faith of children. He said

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Luke 18:16-17

Children begin with the heart and so should we.

So it would seem that this Old Testament reading about golden calves is more relevant because then we might initially have suspected. Golden calves do not always look like a golden calves.

But the golden calf, as well as being a prohibited graven image, is also a symbol. It symbolises that the Israelites are abandoning the religion of Moses to follow some other. Again this can feel like a problem that no longer exists. I don't think any of us will be sloping off to the Mosque next Friday or indeed to the Gurdwara this afternoon.

But again what matters is the substance that lies beyond the symbolism. What matters is not so much the golden calf as the values, the codes of behaviour that lie behind it. A proper faith begins with a healthy relationship with God. A healthy relationship with God is not about fear, nor about bribery, but about love. Paul repeats what seems to be a very early Christian creed:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

1 Timothy 1:15

That indeed is the heart of our faith. Our relationship with God is not based on our own holiness or goodness but on his generosity.

The Jewish and Christian faith have both been very clear that part of a healthy relationship with God is a healthy relationship with our fellow human beings. Correct worship has implications in correct behaviour. In fact the later Jewish prophets became quite frustrated with the people who were very precise about their worship but also neglectful about their behaviour, as indeed did the author of the Psalm we read a few minutes ago. In some verses we did not read we find these words:

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

Psalm 51:16,17

St John put it like this:

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

1 John 4:20

And Jesus, like the prophets before him, was very clear that love was not simply about our immediate family and friend. It's about how we treat the whole world. Paul demonstrated that in practice as he travelled from city to city, country to country urging, complete strangers to give financial support to their fellow Christians many, many miles away.

Whenever we leave selfish or narrow lives, we are building a golden calf. Whenever we believe that we deserve Gods love, we have built a golden calf. We may not see many golden calves in our living rooms but if we look honestly into her own hearts we will find them.