

Exodus 32: 1-14
Psalm 106: 1-6, 19-23
Philippians 4: 1-9
St. Matthew 22: 11-14

Pentecost 20 2023.

“They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them...”

Exodus 32: 8a

If we enter older Anglican Church buildings, we will often see plaques around the Church building. For example, most of us know the Rev. Marie Loewen, the honorary assistant here. The Rev. Marie is currently priest-in-charge of St. Peter’s Parish in Bermuda. That Church building in Bermuda has over 40 plaques on the walls. Many of them record the names of soldiers who died in battle, but they also contain signs of the Christian faith...

To take another example, the parish of St. Paul’s, Halifax, was constructed in the year 1750. Next to the altar, or communion table, are 3 plaques: One of them is the Apostles Creed – the summary of the Christian faith which we confess at our baptisms. The second plaque contains the Lord’s Prayer, when the Lord Jesus taught his friends how to pray. The third plaque contains the Ten Commandments...

What is it about the Ten Commandments, that they were considered so important, that they were displayed at the front of the building, to remind the worshipers every time they came forward to receive the eucharistic sacrament?...

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the old regulations and ritual laws are no longer binding on Christians. For example, we are not required to have special diets – we can eat whatever we like... Yet Christians are still expected to live moral lives – conduct which honours God...

Let’s recall that the Ten Commandments were revealed to Moses as the Israelites were wandering in the desert after escaping from Egypt. The second group of commandments is about our conduct with one another. The *first* group of the Ten Commandments is about our conduct toward God... The first commandment is, “You shall have no other gods before me.” The second commandment is, “You shall not make for yourself an idol...”

Yet, as Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments, all was not well with the people of Israel!... Today’s first reading is about what God’s people were doing on the bottom of Mount Sinai, while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments... They were making *an idol* – a golden calf! – to worship. Actually, it was Aaron, Moses’ brother, who made the idol. When the people pressured him to make an idol, Aaron caved in. The atmosphere among the Israelites becomes like an unpleasant party, where everyone is indulging a little too much and are talking a little too loud; utterly self-absorbed...

Self-absorbed. Self-centred in our own indulgences. That's a key sign that worshipers are turning away from the living God, to an idol of their own making. It might be a golden calf, or some other substitute. But it is not humble adoration of the living God...

Long ago, a bishop named Augustine of Hippo contrasted 2 cities – the earthly city of Rome, as the Roman Empire was falling apart in crude self-indulgence; and the new Jerusalem – the eternal Church of God in all its splendour in heaven, being realized on earth... Years ago, one of my teachers wrote,

As St. Augustine puts it (in conscious opposition to Roman paganism), two 'cities' are founded by two loves: one love which looks to the reality of God; and another which turns away to self, and makes our world a dismal fantasy...

So, there is the living God revealing his purposes for his covenant people on the *top* of Mount Sinai. At the same time, there is the rebellious people on the bottom of the mountain... Moses hasn't shown up with God's plan according to their own agenda, and so they make a golden calf from jewelry, and claim that this idol is what led them out of slavery in Egypt...

We know the rest of the story. As the contemporary songwriter Michael Card puts it,

The Lamb is a Lion that's filling with rage
At the empty religion that's filling their days,
They'll flee from the harm of the Carpenter's strong arm
And come to know the scourging anger of the Lord...

The Lord God of hosts is indeed filled with rage at the disobedience of the people! It is only after speaking with Moses that the people are spared...

Now, there are a variety of ways in which we can read Bible passages. Some of them should be read as history – and the story of the people revelling with the golden calf is certainly an example of this... Some Bible passages can be read as types, or signs of the presence of Jesus Christ, even in the Old Testament. For example, worship misdirected at the golden calf can remind us of the Pharisees and scribes, who misdirected *their* worship, and failed to recognize the Messiah in their midst... Yet another way of understanding Bible passages is to see how they speak into our lives today, even though they were written originally for a very different culture... I suggest that today's first reading is one of these times...

We likely think we are more sophisticated today: We don't kneel before molten gold crudely fashioned into the shape of a calf – and that is surely correct... However, idols can be far more subtle than crude pieces of metal.

We are in danger of worshiping an idol, any time we put too much focus on something in God's creation, and not enough focus on our true King of kings. Once again: We are in danger of worshiping an idol, any time we put too much focus on something in God's creation, and not enough focus on our true King of kings...

There are many good things in life. We are so blessed in this nation of Canada, aren't we? We aren't in Israel right now, or Gaza – or many other places in the world where human sin is obviously potent... But who is our first desire? During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness..."

There is only room enough in our hearts for one Ultimate... It is either the living God, or some substitute...

If we were to read a couple of paragraphs after today's first reading, we would learn that Moses confronts the people with their disobedience. There is a process of deep repentance throughout the community. The golden calf idol is utterly destroyed – they had to get rid of that spiritual trap from their lives... Indeed, the story of God's people can be read as a long journey, of straying and returning...

In our generation, this passage invites us to self-reflect: What is *our* first focus?... If we have strayed from the One who loves us forever, we need to go through these same steps of recognizing, repenting, and re-focusing – all to God's greater glory, and for our greater good; now and for ever.

Amen.