

The One Beyond the Many

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, on Sunday 9 October 2011, by David Gill. Readings for the seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost were Exodus 32:1-14, Philippians 4:1-9 and St Matthew 22:1-14

Last Sunday, the Revised Common Lectionary – our three-yearly cycle of Bible readings -- had many congregations hearing again about the Ten Commandments. The first of the ten is the most important. It warns against the primary sin from which all others derive. Can you remember the first commandment?

I see some blank faces: St Stephen's, this is a worry! Let me help. *"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God ..."*

That's pretty clear. But, as we heard a few minutes ago, the first commandment did not survive unbroken for very long. Evidently people were getting tired of Moses' leadership. They'd been wandering in the wilderness for years. They'd suffered hunger and thirst. Moses wasn't always around when they needed him. What he taught them about God wasn't always what they wanted to hear. The God he talked about seemed, well, rather remote, distant, inaccessible.

We can fix that, they decided. So one day, when the boss is out of camp, probably talking to the Lord again, the people approach Aaron, his deputy. "Make gods for us," they ask. OK, replies Aaron, evidently one of those who think leadership is about giving people whatever they want, regardless. Bring me the gold from your jewelry, he says, then takes the gold, melts it down and shapes a golden calf.

The people have their desired "worship experience" – to use an unfortunate term we hear rather a lot today. Apparently nobody asks awkward questions about the content of the worship – which also happens rather a lot today. Then they get stuck into some serious partying, to celebrate their new god.

The Lord, however, is not amused. Moses, he says, do you know what they're up to now? *"Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of*

Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it ...!” Moses, get yourself down there, now, and sort those people out!

Moses does sort them out. The revelry is stopped, the idol smashed. There's even a massacre. Thus the prohibition on idolatry is reinforced, to become an essential part of the identity not only of Judaism but also of its two descendents, Christianity and Islam.

Well all that happened long centuries ago, in a far distant place, a vastly different culture. Today the story seems quaint, possibly absurd, certainly irrelevant. After all, we 21st century Australians don't go around manufacturing gods for ourselves, do we.

Or do we?

John Calvin, the great reformer, had no doubts about humanity's proclivity for god-making. "Every one of us," he wrote, "is, even from his mother's womb, a master craftsman of idols".

Do not, however, leap from that to the wrong conclusion. Some of Calvin's followers thought the prohibition of idols was a green light for them to destroy things of beauty that actually were of considerable spiritual value. To see where that can lead, just visit St Pierre's Cathedral in Geneva. Those ultra Protestant ancestors of ours took what was once a beautiful cathedral and turned it into what is now a tragedy – still a church, of course, but now stark, colourless and cold. A sad mistake.

In approaching God, we poor frail mortals need all the help -- visual, architectural, musical and otherwise -- that we can get. We should be enriching, not diminishing, the ways in which our places of worship speak of the divine mystery. So, St Stephen's, do not imagine for one minute that I'm suggesting you should take down your cross or tear out your stained glass windows. Do not burn the hymn books or ditch the candles. There's no need to take an axe to the organ and please don't chase away the choir. We need all the helps to worship we can find.

The idols we need to deal with lurk elsewhere.

Another church reformer, Martin Luther, points us in the right direction. “Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon,” he wrote, “that is truly your God”. There are many such: things that absorb our total attention, causes that claim our unquestioning allegiance, whose ultimate impact upon us is destructive. We know them. But it is the gods we are not aware of, the subtle ones, the idols whose divine pretensions we fail to discern, that are the most dangerous of all.

The gods in question may be things individuals craft for themselves. The job that comes to matter more than anything else in the world. An addiction to power, in one form or another. A total preoccupation with “I – me - my”, to the detriment of other people and, ironically, the even greater detriment of myself.

Or our idols may be communal creations. Elenie Poulos, who heads the national justice agency of the Uniting Church, commented recently on the politics of border control being played out by Australia’s major political parties. Noting that keeping asylum seekers out seems to matter more than simple compassion, she suggested our country was indulging in what she called “border worship” – a term which, I submit, has just enough truth in it to make us squirm.

The great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr drew attention to what is surely the most lethal of humanity’s idols. It is the one we worship, he said, “when the nation pretends to be God”. His nation, sadly, has made a habit of entangling the cross with the flag, but the same danger exists everywhere.

St Stephen’s, I suggest, needs to be especially alert to this temptation. This church more than most is the venue for civic events and national commemorations. It houses symbols of the nation: flags, honour boards, regimental colours, vice regal pews and the like. St Stephen’s, therefore, has a special responsibility to make clear that this nation is not God, and to articulate courageously the challenge of the One who is.

Doing that, of course, can be costly. When Christians run scared of their prophetic task, it’s often because the Church itself has morphed into an idol. In 1969, I was a junior member of staff of the World Council of Churches. Colleagues had been

discussing a proposed new program to combat racism. At one point I heard myself warning that this was going to be very controversial and, as a result, the World Council might lose some member churches. My wise general secretary thought for a moment, then growled “Dave, you may be right. But I’m not interested in keeping the WCC going, if it must be at the expense of what the WCC should be standing for”. He was right. I was dead wrong.

It can happen so easily. We give the well-being of an institution priority over obedience to the will of God, and -- viola! – without quite being aware of doing it we’ve made ourselves another golden calf!

All such idols, of course, ultimately fail. Their promises remain unfulfilled, their pretensions revealed for all to see.

While, overarching them all, there stands, still, the invitation of One beyond the many, the True beyond the false, the God beyond all our idols. Today’s gospel talked about it, with Jesus’ parable about gracious invitations and stubborn refusals, divine love so freely offered, so foolishly rejected.

Paul got it right, in those words we heard addressed to the Philippians. Rejoice in the Lord always, he wrote. In him, in him alone, you will find the joy that endures.

For when all our plans are forgotten, He is.

When all our illusions have gone, He is.

When all our dreams have faded, He is.

When all our empires have crumbled, He is.

When all our idols lie in the dust, He is.

The Eternal. The One beyond the many. The God beyond our gods. Who holds us in life and in death. In whom alone is the peace that passes understanding.

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