

'Freedom from control, freedom for covenant'

A sermon preached by Trevor on 7th April 2019

Text: Exodus 32:1-20

In our series of sermons for the Sundays in Lent we are exploring together the theme of *freedom*, allowing the story of the Exodus and Israel's sojourn in the wilderness together with God to liberate us from some preconceived notions of freedom, and to remind us both of some of the things God sets us free *from*, and the things God sets us free *for*. Today's focus is freedom *from* control, and freedom *for* covenant. Because, ironically, as we have already seen over the course of this series of sermons, it is only as we surrender the control we like mistakenly to suppose we exercise (and should be able to exercise) over our own lives (choosing what we shall do, who we shall be, how we shall live – laying down our own terms in everything, even, if truth be told, when it comes to our relationship with God) ... it's only as we surrender that control and instead submit to God's call to us to enter into relationship with God, and to serve God with all our heart, and mind, and soul (that is to say, with *everything* that we are, and have and do) that we can and shall discover true liberation. Because only when our lives are properly orientated to God first can we begin to live our lives in accordance with who and what we were created to be; and then our relationships with everything else begin to fall into their proper place, and we are freed from the unhealthy influence, the dominion, the control that they all too often exercise over us. God is the God, as the Prayer Book puts it, 'in service of whom alone is perfect freedom'. But that makes it sound like no fun at all. So let's begin somewhere else...

What shape is an idol? What exactly does one look like?

Idolatry is a sin condemned repeatedly and consistently in the Bible, and especially in the Old Testament. And, as we saw in our Old Testament reading this morning, it seems to be a sin to which, from the very outset of her walk with God, Israel is particularly prone. While the cat's away the mice will play. And "Come", the people say to Aaron (who is temporarily in charge as Moses returns to the mountain top to speak with God) – "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us"! So Aaron – no doubt eager to please and be a popular leader—goes with the flow. "Okay", he says, "but it's going to cost you. I need something to work with, and gods don't come cheap you know. Take off all your precious jewellery and bring it to me, and I'll see what I can do". And so they do. They take off all the gold earrings and rings and bracelets and trinkets which must be pretty much the only riches they have, all they could possibly carry with them in their recent hurried escape from slavery in Egypt; and they hand it all over to be smelted down and fashioned into what is no doubt an impressive, shiny new work of art— something of considerable monetary value and perhaps

aesthetically satisfying too. And, once it's finished, the people take it, and put it at the centre of their religious attentions: "*Here* are your gods, O Israel", they say, "who brought you up out of Egypt"!!

What on earth is going on?!? After all, the people are still camped on the lower slopes of Mount Sinai, the mountain to which Moses has only just led them from the bank of the Red Sea, now littered unexpectedly with Egyptian corpses; the mountain whose summit is swathed in the cloud of smoke and fire which signifies God's own holy presence; the mountain from which God himself has so recently approached them and spoken to them, entering into the most intimate relationship with them, and placing them under some very clear and stringent obligations. And what is the first – not the second, or the third, but the first thing that God says to them on that auspicious occasion? "I am the Lord your God, the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourselves an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in 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; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.." (Exod. 20:1-5) So, what on earth are the people playing at?!? No sooner has this been said, no sooner has Moses turned his back on the people and ascended the mountain to resume his negotiations with God, than we find the people doing precisely what they've been told not to! It's a case of "In one ear, and out the other" as my mother used to say when I was a kid (actually, she still does say it...) It's as if, having been given ten commandments, they've decided to work through them systematically, beginning with the first, and see what happens if they break them. What on earth do they think they are up to?

Perhaps we suppose, to some extent rightly, that this is a difficult question for us today to answer. Maybe we look at the whole escapade unfolding here at the foot of the mountain (making likenesses of farm animals, and setting up altars to them, and revelling around them), and see it as bound up with some sort of primitive religious mumbo-jumbo, far removed from the sort of religious practice we are familiar with or ever likely to be involved in. It's not very Anglican is it?! And I think it's probably fair to say that you're unlikely to get a letter or an email any time soon from the Vestry or the Ministry Team urging you to bring all your jewellery down to the church carpark so that it can be smelted down for an as yet undisclosed use in Evensong. So, perhaps we reckon too, on similar grounds, that the first of the Ten Commandments, therefore, is one (in all fairness probably the *only* one, but *one* at least!) that we are in little danger of falling foul of. We might well suppose that. ... But I think we'd be wrong, and wrong on both counts.

To begin with, whatever is going on in our Old Testament reading, and no matter how disobedient and disloyal to God it must finally be judged to be, I don't think it's primitive mumbo-jumbo. We're perhaps a bit hard and overly judgmental about the levels of sophistication embedded in religious practices so unfamiliar to us and remote from us in terms of their external forms as ancient Israel is, and what we don't find ourselves able to understand we can all too easily dismiss as mere primitivism. On the face of it, religious idols like the golden calf may be

quite alien to our own cultural setting, but in their own setting they may well have had a meaning and a function much more subtle, and with which we might find ourselves, on reflection, altogether more at home. I'll mention just two.

First, in the sorts of religion with which the Israelites were probably very familiar (don't forget, in our reading they are still at the very beginning of their relationship with the God whose story the Bible tells), idols were one way of securing a sense of a god's concrete presence and availability. An idol was visible and tangible, and so could provide a sort of religious security blanket when things got tough or when in other respects god might seem far away. In our passage, God has spoken to the people, but then withdrawn again up the mountain, taking Moses with him. And, we're told, Moses' return has been delayed. He's been gone about 40 days and 40 nights – a wholly respectable interval in biblical terms as we know; but the people seem to be getting twitchy. "Make us some gods, Aaron", they say, "and be quick about it. God only knows what's happened to that Moses character, but we can't wait any longer. We need something to hold onto in the meanwhile."

The other function that idols seem to have performed in the religious practices of Israel's neighbours was that of rendering god rather more *manageable*. An idol could be taken out or put away as and when it was deemed desirable; and by doing things with and to the idol, people apparently supposed that (because it was indeed an image of their god) the god himself could be effectively coerced into doing things—securing a good harvest, engineering victory in an upcoming battle, and so on. There was, it was thought, a link between the physical reality of the idol, and the spiritual reality of the god, and one by virtue of which, by laying hands on the statue, god himself might be manipulated in one way or another.

So, perhaps in their rush to get Aaron to fashion a golden calf, the Israelites didn't suppose at all that they were displacing God, or "having other gods before him". Perhaps, on the contrary, they were all too eager to rekindle his presence among them, and to do so in ways and using religious technologies akin to those they knew best. Of course, they had a huge amount still to learn about the God who had rescued them from Egypt, and who even now was unfolding for Moses the precise implications of his own Lordship for the shape of Israel's life. They still had to discover that he was a sovereign God who would be closer to them than they were even to themselves, but whose presence could not be conjured up like a genie at the rub of a bottle, or held on to and tethered to a particular time and place, but had to be given and received as a gift freely bestowed and received without condition or control. And they had to learn, too, that this was a God who would supply all their need, and grant them life in all its fullness, but one whose good pleasure and beneficence could not be bought like a commodity or turned on like water from a tap, being entirely a matter of promise and faithfulness in which they must learn to trust, and on which they must learn to be willing to stake their whole lives.

So – if the externals and mechanics of the golden calf incident seem foreign and remote to us, perhaps the impulses lying behind it—a desire for a more constant and immediate sense of God's presence in our midst, and a wish to be able to

secure and hold on to and, yes, even ‘control’ God’s good favour and blessing in our lives—these are things much closer to home. And in these things, at least, we need to make sure that we learn and relearn the lessons which, in our reading, the Israelites still clearly had to learn.

There’s another thing about idols though. And that’s their tendency, finally, to *usurp* God’s proper place in our human affections, expectations and priorities. What *begins* as a mere means to communion with a God understood as lying beyond it, all too often, too easily and too quickly collapses into the superstitious investment in what are in themselves lifeless artefacts, of powers and prerogatives belonging properly and only to God himself. And so people start praying *to* statues, or whatever it might be, rather than, as it were, praying to God *through* them. Investing supreme significance in particular things or ways of saying or doing things in church, rather than grasping that *supreme* importance, *supreme* value belongs only to God himself, the one who lies *beyond* anything that we do or say here, and by comparison with whom none of it matters a jot. And if we treat it as if it did, if we fall into the trap to ascribing to the various externals of our relationship with God a value that does not and cannot belong to them as such, then they will gradually choke that relationship rather than serving to facilitate it. That which might in principle be *sacramental* becomes instead *sacrilegious* by failing to refer us and our attentions beyond itself to God himself, and effectively taking God’s place in our hearts and minds and imaginings.

We can probably all think of things which, in our own religious lives, have on some occasion or other, had this ambivalent status—maybe a person, maybe a particular place, maybe a particular way of worshipping which promised to be a rich channel or conduit for our relationship with God but which for some reason began or at least threatened to become too much of a focus in and of itself, too much of a fixation, too important to us, because we allowed it to become in practice *more* important to us (for a mad, unthinking season) than God himself. And rather than becoming a vehicle or a means of our relationship with God, it became a blockage, or a hindrance, or exercising a stranglehold on that relationship, the life of God itself being squeezed out of the relationship by something or someone or somewhere much more immediate, much more tangible and accessible, much easier to influence or control or subject to our own demands, felt needs and religious preferences than God himself could ever be.

But idolatry need not be religious of course. I began by asking What shape is an idol? And the answer is, of course, any and every shape. Because *anything* and everything, if it becomes the centre of our attention, of our affections, our expectations and hopes and desires, our priorities in life, anything that in practice (not in *theory*, but in practice, in the actual decisions we make and the things we do and strive for in our day to day living) becomes *more important* to us than God himself, can become for us an idol, another “god” placed before him, and an all too real and serious flouting of that first commandment. The problem with the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, the Psalmist tells us in Ps 106 verse 20, is that they “exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass”. Before we jump to endorse and echo the criticism, we might like to stop

and ask ourselves, how often have *we* exchanged the glory of God for something more immediate, something more manageable, something more instantaneous or more attractive in its promised provision of gratification; and exactly what shape *was* it?