

Sermon: 18th March 2021: Witney Zoom

Thursday

Ex 32, 7-18 and John 5, 31-end

May I speak in the name of God, Creator, Word and Spirit

In the first reading we had the part of the rather lengthy story of the making and worshipping of the golden calf whilst Moses was up the mountain communing with his God. As they bowed in worship before the golden calf/calves the people of Israel spoke these words, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Just the other day they had promised, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." This to-ing and fro-ing between the worship of idols and the worship of the one whose name was considered too sacred to voice is of course is a theme running right through the Old Testament --- The psalmist laments, "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God their saviour who had done great things for them in the land of Egypt." And the prophet

Jeremiah is very blunt, “My people have forgotten me, they burn offerings to a delusion.”

In the gospel reading the link with idolatry is not immediately so obvious. Jesus has just healed the man by the pool of Bethesda but his opponents, who were rather over scrupulous about keeping the law were not happy that this healing had been wrought on the Sabbath Day. The rebuttal of their accusations is long and quite intricate – we join it at the point when Jesus is honing in on the very issue they pride themselves on, their knowledge and interpretation of the Jewish scriptures! He says, “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” That’s quite a scary verse so we need to go further to see what he is getting at and why he maintains “You do not have the love of God in you”. That sounds so harsh to a group of men who spend their lives focusing on the scriptures, but it can be an issue for all religions that the form they are used to

becomes more important than the substance and here it becomes clear what they are about. “How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?” Whatever Jesus could see in his critics it seems that there was an element of self-preening going on which was taking their attention away from God.

It's easy to read about the idolatry present in other societies and religions but of course it's a harder challenge to root it out in our own. If we are in it we are usually blind to it but let me try to name some present day idols. The first must be the way that the Western world is so wedded to consumerism and economic growth that it has been content to ignore the devastation this is wreaking on our planet. Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* makes the idolatry of this very clear. “Whatever is fragile like the environment, is defenceless before the deified market, which becomes the only rule”. Harvey Cox makes this even clearer when he speaks of the theology of the business pages where the

“celestial pinnacle” is occupied by “The Market”. Recently I read the term “nature finance” which seemed to me a contradiction in terms.

Our second idol to think about today is the cult of celebrity which is woven into what we hear and see on our screens and in our newspapers. Duncan and I watched a chilling series of programmes *Celebrity: A 21st-Century Story* which focused on the rise of this culture and the money that was made through it for promoters, media outlets and agents who found opportunities within it. Programmes like *Big Brother* or *Pop Idol* could raise previously unknown people to fame and as the BBC maintained, “People were making money hand over fist, with TV producers, broadcasters and press alike all finding ways to monetise the public’s newfound appetite for celebrity”. Children have been heard to say that they want to be famous when they grow up. The programme also showed how the cult of celebrity and the powerful interests behind it could affect the voting patterns of nations.

The market, celebrity and I want to add one more idol which is also quite widespread throughout the Western world which is the belief that God is both white and male. God is beyond all definition but that unconscious assumption of what we think God looks like can be at the root of much racial hatred and injustice. Each one of the idols I've suggested has the potential for huge harm and yet they are so much part of our normal living that it can take a real effort to look at them. They are false gods and you might be able to find others.

So how can we root them out and even notice them in our own lives. It seems to me that we do that by the daily struggle to give God a rightful place in our lives. I love the words of Enzo Bianchi, the founder of Bose, the ecumenical monastery in northern Italy. In his little book *Words of Spirituality* he suggests that prayer can become "the space in which our images of God are purified. It implies the daily struggle of leaving behind our manufactured images of God in order to draw nearer to the God revealed in the crucified and risen Christ,

the true image of God given to humanity.” The words daily and struggle are of course important because the struggle against any of our idolatries won’t happen overnight and you will all know as well as I do that prayer is no quick fix. Yet it is here that we are able to allow God into our attitudes and preconceptions; to allow the Spirit to ask hard questions about what we read and watch and how they form us, as we learn to pay attention to our Creator and the world we have been given to live in.

There is a way of thinking about all this which I find compelling and motivating and I want to share a poem by Denise Levertov, it’s called On a Theme by Thomas Merton which doesn’t tell you much but I always remember its first line, “Adam where are you?” Of course it takes us back to the garden of Eden first with God looking for Adam in the cool of the day. But the poem moves between Eden and our busy and distracted lives today. In Eden and in the present day Adam is hidden “God’s hands palpate darkness, the void that is Adam’s inattention”. Adam meanwhile is turning his

frantic attention “to everything” but finds only “multiplicity and despair”. He’s described as a child at a “barbaric fairground” –the smells, the lights, the noise and the “whirling rides” – these could be treasured memories of childhood but for the word “barbaric” and the fact that in the middle of all these distractions Adam “fragments himself”. We are told Adam “stares” but God’s hands are unseen – Adam can no longer see the hands that formed him from the dust or that these hands are searching for him in all the clamour and dazzle. The poem ends with a line which gets me every time I read it, “God suffers the void that is his absence”.

I’d like to end by reading the poem in full – it’s not long

"Adam, where are you?"

God's hands

palpate darkness, the void

that is Adam's inattention,
his confused attention to everything,
impassioned by multiplicity, his despair.

Multiplicity, his despair;

God's hands

enacting blindness. Like a child
at a barbaric fairgrounds --
noise, lights, the violent odors --
Adam fragments himself. The whirling rides!

Fragmented Adam stares.

God's hands

unseen, the whirling rides
dazzle, the lights blind him. Fragmented,
he is not present to himself. God
suffers the void that is his absence.

18th March 2021: Intercessions

The response to Holy God is **Save us and help us**

Holy God -----

“Adam, where are you?” – Searching God, give us grace to allow the work of prayer within us. Lead us and Christians everywhere to turn from all that masquerades as a god and short circuits our worship. Make us alert to anything that takes our energy away from you. *Holy God, **Save and help us***

Creator God, we pray for those working in so many ways to protect the fragile and wondrous planet you have given to us. May world leaders and those who advise them be realistic and courageous about the changes that must be implemented at the COP26 talks in November --- prepare us all to be willing for the sacrifices and change needed in our own lives to protect our planet and those who will come after us. *Holy God, **Save and help us***

God of truth, we pray for all who have the power to influence public opinion through broadcasting, newspapers, publicists and social media. Help us to search for truth and wholeness in what we read and watch. We pray for all for all who promote the tangled web of celebrity culture that they may be responsible,

truthful and wise in all they communicate and for those caught up in it, especially those made ill or diminished by the fame they have sought. *Holy God, **Save and help us***

Multicultural God, thank you that we can never fathom the depths of you and that we have so much to learn from different cultures and traditions. Help us to rejoice in the difference and diversity around us and to be prepared to be taught by it. We pray for all people who continue to suffer discrimination of any kind --- those far away like the Uighur Muslim people of China --- those near at hand who we pass on our streets, who work in our hospitals. *Holy God, **Save and help us***

God of wisdom, we pray for our children and young people as they readjust to life back at school, especially those facing tests and exams. Give to those who are anxious the gift of your peace. Bless our teachers with the energy and creativity they need after such a tough year, and especially those working in schools we know and care about. *Holy God, **Save and help us***

God of love, in trust and in a moment's silence we pause to bring our own worries and prayers to you knowing

that you care about them. We remember especially -----
- *Holy God, **Save and help us***

God of life, we remember all who have died during this strange and sad year of lock-down --- NHS staff, bus drivers, check out assistants and those we know by name. We pray for all who have recently died ----. We pray for all who have been bereaved and who are missing the close support of family and friends. *Holy God, **Save and help us***

Merciful Father ---