

Sermon

Sunday 11 October 2020

Lesson

Exodus 32: 1 – 14

This morning I want to reflect briefly on images of God. What images of God do you use? Are our favoured images both comforting and restrictive? Let me begin with the story of the golden calf.

Freed from the tyranny of Pharaoh, the Hebrew slaves had walked to freedom, crossed the Sea of Reeds, and camped at Mount Sinai.

Once there, Moses had climbed the slopes, entered the darkness of the cloud, and received the tablets of stone from God: the Ten Commandments. A mere forty days later, when Moses was again at the mountain top and absent from the people, the people of the community at the foot of Sinai became fearful that they were alone in the wilderness. In haste, believing themselves defenceless, the people pressured Moses' brother, Aaron, to make gods for them; gods which would journey with them, protecting them day and night.

Aaron called for the gold rings from the ears of wives and daughters to be collected. He had the gold cast into a mould and made the image of a bull-calf. Exuberantly, the people said, ‘These are your gods that brought you up from Egypt!’ If these words and the turn of events were not shocking enough, we hear of God’s fierce wrath:

I have considered this people, and I see their stubbornness. Now, let me alone to pour out my anger on them, so that I may put an end to them...

There is much in this story to reflect upon. It may be read as a straightforward record of historical events but, if so, where did the Hebrew slaves get a furnace in the wilderness? Gold melts at 1064 degrees centigrade! How did they do that in the desert? As the people gazed on the golden calf, they declared that this was the god that brought them out of Egypt: they had just fashioned it in the fire. How could it be the God who had given them freedom? They must have known it could not be so. Stories in Scripture operate on many levels with depth and subtlety, not all of which is obvious in English translations. In the Jewish tradition, this entire episode is called ‘the sin of the calf’.

Are our images of God expansive or restrictive? The Hebrew people were not so foolish as to believe that the golden calf which they had just made was a god. It was a seat, a throne, for God to sit on. Like the Ark of the Covenant, the box in which the Hebrew people stored the tablets of stone, the calf was a seat. It was a conduit to God.

Moses had not returned and the prospect of going on without him in the wilderness terrified the people. Above all, they sought the Divine dwelling among them: they craved God's nearness.

The outrage expressed by God, the seemingly uncontrollable anger, was perhaps because the choice of image was an animal. The second commandment given at Sinai was, 'You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of something that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath...'. Heaven above meant the sun, moon, stars or birds and the earth beneath meant animals or trees. However, in our lesson today, what is perhaps most offensive to our ears is not the calf but the apparent petulant anger of God. God said to Moses, 'Leave me alone'; let me nurse my rage! In fury, like an exasperated parent, God said of the people to Moses, '*Your* people!'

Is it helpful for us to think of a God who flies into a fit of rage or, indeed, a God capable of such violent, disturbing emotion in the first place? To my mind, worse than fashioning a golden calf is the fearful anger of God. For me, the one of the core lessons of this story is the danger of using anthropomorphic language: it is not helpful to use language of God that is all too human. We diminish God when we do so. The dangerous idol in this story is not the calf; it is the God cast, moulded, into the human image!

In the Bible, so much of what is said is symbolic or metaphorical. When we read that a prophet or the Elders of Israel saw God, it is seeing with the intellect, not the physical eyes. When God was said to be near, it is more than a claim of physics; it is a spiritual appreciation of our oneness with the Divine. In the Bible when we read that God spoke to a prophet, we are not meant to think of God's vocal cords; it is a hearing in the heart.

The Divine, the God of Jesus and the cosmos, is Mystery. How could we conceivably understand the One who holds all things in

being: the entire evolving universe; every star, creature, atom and joule of energy? Every thought and spiritual intuition? In the mystical tradition of Christianity and other world faiths, God is elusive, hidden in the darkness, and silent. One Christian mystic wrote of ‘the abyss of God within us’. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet said, ‘Truly, you are a God who hides himself’: *Deus absconditus!* The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, writes, “‘God’ is a one word poem.” It is not that we cannot know God but that we need to be careful in our use of images: images are not only golden calves but language and concepts of the mind.

If we consistently use the male pronoun – *he* – how does that impact on our thinking about God? If God is a personal being, up there, out there, with limitless power to intervene and answer the personal prayers of billions of worshippers, are we aware that these are images of God? These images may be comforting but are they also restrictive? The god who dramatically intervenes is the god of miracles and magic. In my view, the problem with such a god is that

it can lead to atheism. If God can intervene, why did six million Jews die in the Holocaust? Or eighteen million Russians in Stalin's gulag? Or as many as seventy million at the hands of China's Mao? The god who is arbitrary, protecting and helping some but not others is problematic, if not repugnant. God of the cosmos, all-powerful, could not save Jesus from the cross: the might of Rome was unstoppable for a Galilean rabbi.

How, then, might we think of the Divine? For me, sacred Scripture evokes a response. We are to search for the God who is above the god made in the human image. Walking through the countryside of Grasmere and Rydal, the poet Wordsworth spoke of the Sublime. It was an experience of the Transcendent; a consciousness of being at one with the whole of reality, at one with the mystery we call Love.

I believe that, on our spiritual journey, we are to cultivate our sense of the Sacred. Rather than look for interventions by a miraculous god, we learn to open ourselves to the Absolute, to God, so that we may interact with the Sublime. At its best, our journey is a continuous

search or striving to live in the consciousness of God's presence: it is an openness of mind, of the soul. Like Jesus on the cross, we come to see that, whatever decisions we make, whatever befalls us in this life, we are held, embraced and cherished by the Divine Presence. Our receptivity lets the Divine transform us.

Amen.