

Exodus 32:1-12

15.10.17

The glory of God

Maybe I'm too soft, but I can't help feeling some sympathy for the Israelites in this rather bizarre story that we have read this morning from the Book of Exodus. The people of Israel, after all, are vulnerable and anxious. They have been miraculously sprung from captivity in Egypt by a God who they hardly know and who they have not yet learned to trust, and now they are facing the rigours of the desert. Moses, of course, is a key figure for them. Moses is on more familiar terms with this God, and in their uncertainty they rely heavily upon him for leadership and reassurance. But now, disoriented and threatened as they are by this hostile wilderness, Moses disappears. Just when they need him, he's gone AWOL, somewhere up a mountain with this God. And of course Moses' absence spells God's absence. Moses is their point of contact and without him, well, they are without God. And so the Israelites experience that disturbing phenomenon known to many who associate with this God – namely his absence. It seems sometimes that when you need him most he's gone.

So what do these Israelites do? Well in their fear and confusion they need something tangible to hold on to. They need some physical sign of God's presence. When faith is weak and faltering we sometimes need sight. We need something to hold on to – literally. And so they say to Aaron, 'come, make us gods who will go before us...' Make us a God we can follow – visibly. Bring God here, into our midst, in a concrete manifestation. And so they take their jewellery, earrings that had been pressed upon them by the Egyptians as they escaped, and they make this visual, tangible idol, firing and melting the jewellery and moulding this golden calf. And of course in so doing they are violating the very commands that this God had only just given them. They are transgressing the very law that God had given them up on the mountain, a law that was supposed to mark them out as different from every other nation upon the earth. And in particular the Israelites are breaking the second commandment which says, 'you shall not make 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...' That command is clearly being discarded, however much we might sympathise with the Israelites for doing so. And indeed we

might ask here just why this command is given in the first place. What is so wrong with making a physical representation of God? And doubtless there are many answers to that, but given that one day this God will take flesh, that this God will one day clothe himself with physical flesh and blood we can see why this is a sensitive area. God will not be formed in metal or stone when one day he will be formed in flesh. But to make an idol of God is also to belittle God, to diminish God. It is to fix God. It's to limit God, when God is always sovereign and free. To make an idol of God is to put God within our grasp, and how can the infinite and eternal God ever be confined that way? God will always escape our clutches. In short, what is at stake here is God's glory, the fullness of who God is. It is the glory of God that is in jeopardy here as God is reduced to silver and gold, and it is concern for the glory of God that features later in the story too. And this bit I love.

The scene changes from the golden calf to the mountain where God and Moses are in dialogue, and God, aware of what is happening down below, aware of the violating of the commandments, is enraged. Indeed he is ready to disown Israel. I love the way he says, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.' Note – *your* people! I thought God had adopted Israel! I thought they were God's chosen. But God seems eager to dissociate himself from Israel: they're '*your* people.' And then further on Moses bats that particular ball back into God's court: he says, 'O Lord why does your wrath burn hot against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt...' (Subtext: 'hey, these aren't *my* people – they're yours!). And then comes this extraordinary argument that Moses uses to persuade God not to abandon Israel – and it all hinges around God's glory. Just think, says Moses, what the Egyptians will say if you desert Israel now. 'Huh! So much for this God! He rescues people only to then abandon them! What kind of God is that?' So think about your reputation, God! Think about what people will say about you! Israel has been placed upon the earth to bring glory to you. It's manner of life is meant to reflect you, its God. Israel is meant to bring honour to your name, and building an idol out of Egyptian jewellery dishonours you. But you are in danger of dishonouring yourself if you petulantly cast Israel aside! And so God thinks again. The appeal to God's glory and reputation changes God's mind.

Now, I would suggest that here we touch on an essential part of the Christian life, and the life of the church. When all is said and done, what are we

here for? Why are we called by God? Why are we called, like Israel of old, into this deep covenant relationship with God? Well, it's all about bringing honour and glory to God's name. One of the founding documents of the Church of Scotland of which we are a part comes from the 17th century and is known as the Shorter Catechism. The Shorter Catechism was a means of instructing people in the Christian faith and it consists of a series of questions and answers that believers were once taught to recite. The first question in the Shorter Catechism is 'what is the chief end of man?' And the answer, recited by generations of the faithful, was 'the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever'. This is what we have been made for. Our true glory and – note – enjoyment consists in the glorifying of God and enjoying him forever. And Israel of old and the church today is called to demonstrate that to the world, to manifest it and demonstrate it.

So how do we do this? And here I want to return once again to the Reformation whose 500th anniversary we remember this year. One of the great insights of the Reformation was that God was glorified not just in religious things but in the whole of life. You could say that the world before the Reformation was one that was dominated by religion. Life was constantly overshadowed by heaven and hell, and the world was populated with all sorts of intermediaries between heaven and earth – Mary, and the saints, and priests and popes and spiritual powers and forces. What the Reformation did was to assert that God alone is sovereign and that banished all the other would-be powers and intermediaries between us and God. It's often said that the reformation 'disenchanted' the world, demystified it. What the Reformation did, with its emphasis on the sole sovereignty of God, was to clear a space where human life could flourish. And that meant that all human activity and not just religious activity was affirmed: art, and work and family life and, in due course, science. The Reformation decluttered the universe and gave place to human endeavour, and in this way it promoted a true form of humanism.

To give an example of this which comes to mind. Some of you may have seen the film a few years ago, 'Chariots of Fire', about the Scottish athlete and missionary Eric Liddell, who famously refused to run a race in the 1924 Olympic because it was held on a Sunday. There's a lovely moment when Liddell's sister, Mary, is trying to dissuade him from being an athlete at all, insisting that he should give it all up and go out into the mission field. To her running was trivial in comparison to saving souls. And Liddell replies, 'God

made me fast. And when I run I can feel his pleasure'. That says it all. To his sister God could only be glorified in some overtly Christian activity – missionary work. But Liddell saw God glorified and enjoying him when he exercised to the best of his ability the gift he had been given. That was the Reformation's gift: an affirmation of what we now call the secular: mundane everyday life in all its richness, and not just religion. So the boss does not glorify God by beginning and ending work at the factory each day with prayers and hymns. He or she glorifies God by paying a just and fair wage and by ensuring that the wellbeing of the workforce. And parents do not glorify God by teaching them the Shorter Catechism – at least not by that alone. Parents glorify God by bringing up children in love, freedom and security. It is in all of life, the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, the heavenly and the mundane, that God is glorified.

So in our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians this morning, Paul writes those lovely words, 'Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.' Wherever these qualities are found, there the glory of God shines. Recall the great prayer that Jesus taught us, beginning with the words, 'our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name...' It is this that frames all prayer – the desire not necessarily for what we want but for the hallowing and honouring of God's name. And it is this that frames all human life and is the goal and ultimate purpose of life.

These past weeks we have been saying goodbye to a much-loved member of this church who passed away. There has been a funeral and a thanksgiving service and our minds have been focussed on the life of Charles, how he lived, and it's been uplifting. And the death of any loved one and the celebration of their life cannot help but raise questions about what makes for a good life. What makes for a fulfilled life? What does it mean to live and to die well? We know the answers we're supposed to sign up to today: happiness and wealth and prosperity, fame and celebrity. Well, no, the true answer to the meaning of life is not found here. For that we must return to the mountain back there in the desert, where Moses and God communed while the people danced around an idol. What was at stake there, in the actions of the Israelites and in God's reaction, was the glory of God. But this is not just about a concern for

God and God's name and reputation. It's also about us and how we live: 'for the chief end of humankind is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.' Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
all glory and honour be to your holy name.
We praise you, we bless you
as we gather here to worship you above all
and beyond all, sovereign Lord of all.
O living God, you have made us for yourself,
made us to love us and to honour us,
and for us to love and honour you,
and in such mutual love you are glorified
and we are dignified.
Forgive us, living God, when we dishonour you.
Forgive us when rather than
glorifying you we grieve you.
Forgive us for when we give our allegiance
to lesser gods and choose captivity over freedom.
O God we confess to you our sins,
and we praise you that even as we do so
you are reaching out to us in grace and forgiveness,
patient with us and refusing to let us go.
Send your Holy Spirit we pray into our hearts
and give us grace and strength to honour
and to worship you with our lives,
and so to hallow and to bring glory to your name.
In Jesus' name we pray and in the words he taught us
We join together, saying...