

Exodus 32:1-14

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Mountain glory and golden calf

It's one of the classic encounters in the Bible: an extraordinary confrontation between God who has only just led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt - and Moses, God's right-hand man who has been instrumental in that great escape. What is fascinating about this episode is what it reveals of God, and of Moses and of the Israelites. And so we are treated to a very different picture of God from what we might expect; and we see a Moses who shows considerable tenacity in standing up to God and even out-manoeuvring him; and we see disturbing features in the Israelites that we may recognise in ourselves.

So let's begin with the basic story. The Israelites, freshly sprung from captivity in Egypt are travelling through the wilderness. A few chapters earlier there has been an amazing scene at a mountain called Sinai where God has made a deal with Israel. 'I will be your God', says God, 'and I will care for you and protect you. But in return you will be my people – and here are a bunch of commandments about how you should live as a liberated nation. And so you will exhibit to the world what life with God looks like.' Well, that sounds like a plan, but now it's coming under severe stress. Moses is still on the mountain and has been for a long time – forty days and forty nights – and the Israelites are beginning to wonder what is going on. Moses is their main link with God and now he's gone AWOL and they are feeling bereft and so they have a bright idea: let's make gods who will go before us and guide us. So they gather up their jewellery and before you know it they have made a golden calf and set up an altar in front of it and then they are making offerings and revelling and cavorting before this idol: 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt', they proclaim. And of course in so doing they are violating the very commandments that God was giving them. They are falling back into the very practices God was delivering them from.

Now, let's turn our attention first to the mountain and what is going on there. God sees what is happening below and is enraged. Indeed he is ready to disown Israel. But Moses pushes back against God and changes God's mind. Just think, says Moses, what the Egyptians will say if you desert Israel now. 'So much for this God! He rescues people only to then abandon them! What kind of God is that?' And so God thinks better of it. And Moses effectively out-

manoeuvres God, out smarts God: not how we normally think of the sovereign, all-wise God.

What is crucial about this scene however is the little picture it gives of the Gospel, of the very heart of the faith we profess. There, after all, is God: holy and beyond and above us and yet longing for communion with human creatures, reaching out to a people who God loves and who will return that love. And down below are we human beings: so prone to idolatry, so determined to make our own gods, so self-destructive and easily lead astray. And yet in-between God and the people there is a mediator. Here it is Moses, Moses who stands between the people and God, representing them and pleading their cause. And God is not some austere sovereign who is unapproachable but we glimpse here the humanity of God as Moses bends him away from the rigours of holiness and towards the pull of grace and mercy. And surely in that figure of Moses interceding, mediating, we see a prefiguring of one who will come in the fullness of time and stand between us and God, one who speaks for us and becomes a channel of blessing and grace, tipping the tension between holiness and mercy towards mercy. Then, Moses; now Jesus: so salvation comes. It's all here in this incident: the story of the Gospel.

Then, however, we move back down the mountain to the people and we focus on them for a moment. And I confess that I can't help feeling some sympathy for the Israelites here. They, after all, are vulnerable and anxious. Miraculously released from captivity by a God who they hardly know, they have not yet learned to trust, and now they are facing the rigours of the desert. And Moses, their leader, has disappeared. And where previously, on leaving Egypt, God's had been with them in a cloud that led them during the day and a pillar of fire that accompanied them at night – signs of God's presence – now these have evidently gone. Just when they need him, Moses has vanished, and with him gone God seems to have gone too. 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 God most he's not here.

Perhaps we don't talk about this enough. Perhaps we fall into the trap sometimes of mis-selling God: offering God as a comfort blanket who is always there for us and whose presence we always sense, accompanying us. But that's not the picture here in this passage and nor elsewhere. Recently our 20s-30s group watched a lecture by a wonderful preacher and teacher, Barbara

Brown Taylor, entitled ‘Walking in the Dark.’ She spoke of the elusive side of God, and the times of darkness and absence and silence that we experience with this God and she used one image that stayed with me. She was talking about how we talk of God as light and of faith as walking in that light and the sunny side of salvation. But she described how she lives on a farm and some nights she goes out onto the veranda and looks up at the moon. And sometimes the moon is full on, like a headlight, and sometimes it’s just a slither and sometimes its invisible – hidden by clouds or by eclipse. And Taylor spoke of a lunar faith where the light of God may ebb and flow and the sense of the presence of God may come and go. You see, we cannot turn God on like a tap. We cannot control the presence of God. That’s what the Israelites were trying to do by making their own god. And we may experience seasons, as the Israelites did, when we wonder where God has gone. And that is when fellowship and the faith community are so important as we allow the faith of others to hold us. The church is called to be a place where faith is sustained, when for some God is absent.

That brings to my last point from this story. With God absent, with God departed, just look at what the Israelites got up to. They create other gods and they resort to self-indulgence and hedonism and excess. And it’s no accident here that the golden calf is made from jewellery for it’s the gods of wealth and materialism that take pride of place when God is removed. They say that nature abhors a vacuum and there is something of that with God. With God apparently gone a vacuum is created which is soon filled by other things. And let me suggest why we should be concerned about this.

Perhaps what is not always sufficiently appreciated is how much the Christian faith has shaped our modern world – and how, despite the Church’s failings, so much that is admirable and humane comes directly from our society’s Christian roots and belief in the Judaeo-Christian God. So from its earliest days Christianity challenged the Roman Empire with startling and momentous claims: that humans were fashioned in the image of a sole, sovereign and gracious Creator; that this God’s Son had died equally for everyone; that in Christ there was neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, that the poor and the vulnerable have a special status in this God’s eyes. And from these foundations there emerged in later centuries features we now take for granted and are described as ‘enlightened’: that human beings –

even the poorest and weakest - have rights; that we are born equal; that we are owed sustenance, and shelter, and refuge from persecution.

You see, these are not and never were universal, self-evident truths to be taken for granted: they came from a specific world view provided over by the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ. And such convictions can be questioned when that God was questioned. And the philosopher Nietzsche above all understood how much of our civilization derives from our Christian God, and our crucified servant Lord, and Nietzsche despised the exalting of mercy and gentleness and the honouring of the weak that emerged from this. So a magazine published by the Nazi SS in 1939 declared this: "Harping on and on that God died on the cross out of pity for the weak, the sick and sinners, Christians then demand that the genetically diseased be kept alive in the name of a doctrine of pity that goes against nature, and of a misconceived notion of humanity." And Dostoyevsky went so far as to declare that if God is dead then everything is permitted. Here is the golden calf that emerges when the God of Mt Sinai is removed – and well might we fear what arises from the depths.

Some of you may have heard of Jean Vanier, the Roman Catholic theologian and humanitarian who died a few months ago. Vanier was the founder of the world-wide network of L'Arche communities where people with disabilities and their carers live together with deep bonds of friendship, respect and equality. And these communities have become profound symbols of a different politics, pointers towards a different, a more humane and a more gentle society - but they are unintelligible without their grounding in the Christian God. And without that God? Well, Vanier has warned that with current abortion practice there will soon be no more Downs Syndrome children left in France. Surely there could be no more devastating indictment than that of a society whose moorings have cut loose from God and who are now in thrall to gods of their own making.

So we have it; the mountain – with the living God enthroned in holiness; and down below the golden calf, the god of human making, and rejection of God. And in-between the mediator, the intercessor, tipping the balance of justice towards mercy - a graphic picture of our faith. We may experience the waxing and the waning of that God's presence, the ebb and flow as the Israelites did. We cannot control, coerce or constrain this God. But we do have the power to banish this God - and beware when we do. There is no

saying what golden calf we will fashion – and are fashioning - in his place.
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...