

Pentecost 21
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Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 32:1 – 14
Psalm 106
Philippians 4:1 - 9
Matthew 22:1 – 14

The golden bull and two sorts of leadership

A couple of weeks ago as the financial crisis deepened, a journalist went down to Wall St where, as you may know, there is a bronze statue of a Bull, a symbol with a wide range of reference to power and fecundity. It stands in Wall St as a symbol of the Stock Market. In that precinct, where people were being traumatised by the chaos, the journalist spoke to a street person who ekes out his living selling small copies of the Golden Bull. “Buy a Golden Bull” he said, “symbol of power and strength, \$20”. This week, as the collapse of free market capitalism has dragged the world to the edge of a financial abyss, many will be wondering just what strength and power the Golden Bull really represents.

Free market capitalism is a bit like an economic version of Darwinianism in which, in an unregulated financial context, free economic agents exercise their choices and market forces rule, eliminating the weak, and allowing the survival of the fittest. In relation to this philosophy we have witnessed two forms of hypocrisy. Firstly if the democratic world really believed in the free market there would be no bail-outs, instead the weak would be allowed to go under, and the strong would survive. Secondly, the bail-outs highlight the need for some form of regulation to prevent a repeat of the worship of the Golden Bull, which has produced greed fuelled manipulation and exploitation of the market without any thought for the consequences.

The story of the Golden Calf is a study in idolatry. It is a rich and subtle text and should be read as more than just an event. Israel’s difficulty in staying faithful to God during Moses’ absence can be compared with Genesis chapter 3 where, having received from God the gifts of life and the world, Adam and Eve transgressed the boundaries that had been set. Rather than allowing God to be God, they gave in to the temptation to become like God and their life began to disintegrate. The story stands as a symbol of the key temptation, and its consequences, humans have to wrestle with: who will we choose to trust for our life, and how will we choose to live. Will we live in reverence of God, and all that means, or is there something extra - for us?

The Golden Calf is about idolatry, not simply because Israel made an image of the invisible God, but because its existence signified a broken relationship. It represented the belief that something other than God could have liberated Israel from slavery. The precious metal and the image of power and fertility was a lifeless substitute for the living God, a sign of false worship and compromised ultimate allegiance.

In the crisis Moses and Aaron displayed entirely different styles of leadership. Aaron did not resist the people’s request for a God to go before them. And he did nothing to

remind them of who God has been for them: a God mercy and grace. He did not reassure them about what Moses was doing or counsel them to wait for his return. As a leader he allowed the people to lead him and did not challenge their doubt about Moses integrity. Aaron gave the people what they wanted and seemed unable to see the conflict between having faith in God and making the calf. He did not understand the difference between God and Bull. When they acclaim the calf he does not object – as far as he is concerned, whatever they like can be called holy.

God was enraged. If God's absence gave rise to fear, God's presence as blazing anger would have been incomprehensibly terrifying. To us the anger of God may seem out of place, but it shows us that the God of Israel is not a prisoner to the covenant. God's will is not immutable but living and free. The God of Israel is not fixed and concrete, like a golden bull.

It is Moses' roles as mediator and intercessor that sets him apart from Aaron. From the point of his call Moses mediated the mercy of God to the people. On the basis of what he knew about God Moses repeatedly faced Israel with what it meant to be faithful to the God who had chosen to set them free. It was a demanding job, and it frustrated Moses, because at every point the mentality of slavery the people had absorbed in Egypt won over the freedom in which they now lived.

But Moses' strength was also turned towards God on behalf of the people. He repeatedly pressed God to be God and to remember the essence of the divine nature, expressed in the gracious deeds characterised by God's name, paraphrased as **I will be there for you**. We should not underrate the meaning and importance of Moses' role. Whereas the people had had preferred something before God, thanks to Moses, despite their betrayal, God chose to honour the people, and chose once more to stay true to the meaning of the gracious past.

Moses the Mediator is a figure of great hope and comfort to us. In Christian theology the role of Moses the mediator is assigned to Jesus Christ who stood between God and humanity and gave himself to win freedom for all. In him we have been given a human face that is the image of the invisible God. In him we have one who prays at God's right hand for us. And he is the one who in his life, death and resurrection continues to direct us to the God of heaven and earth who calls us to live, not for ourselves, but according to the pattern of creative, merciful love that has been revealed in him. The essence of that love is gathered up, in the image of a cross, which sets a limit. It calls us to love as we have been loved, and therefore it is entirely out of step with the code of rampant greed and self-indulgence that characterises our time.

In May this year a Tibetan Buddhist nun gave a talk in Melbourne. Lots of lapsed Christians go to here these people, hoping to solve their problems. After fielding a lot of questions about how to live, many of which were related to how to deal with anger she said: "whenever I talk to people in the West they often ask me how to deal with anger, but they never ask me about how to deal with their greed". Perhaps we need people like that to hold a mirror up to us at times. It is as though we struggle to put boundaries on our anger, but never stop to consider our greed or its consequences. The reality is the code of rampant, self-indulgent greed is ultimately unsustainable. It will wreck the planet and destroy community life. The Golden Bull is not a god who

can save us.

If the current crisis gets really bad it will serve us well if we begin to see that the free market is a fiction (perhaps a load of bull) defended by those who know how to exploit it for their own ends. How many people have to suffer and cry out for help before our leaders will take the bull by the horns and develop a structure of financial governance for our globalised economy? One that keeps in view a greater good than living for ourselves, which keeps in view the needs of the whole of human society, the needs of the planet, and the protection of the weak and vulnerable. Such a plan would go against the grain of present conduct, but it would not be against the heart of God.