

**Pentecost 23**  
**9/10/2011**

**Mark the Evangelist**

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

### **The Golden Calf and right worship of God**

---

A few years ago a monastery in Scotland was written up in a magazine. No longer in its glory days the community is nevertheless enjoying a new lease of life. In conversation with the Abbot the interviewer commented that perhaps all he had seen was some distance from the real life of the world. The Abbot responded by saying that perhaps the monastery was where reality was to be found. The implication being that what the world had to offer was false. A modern secular mind would find this very hard to come to grips with, but what the Abbot was saying applies not just to monasteries. It expresses the central meaning of what it means to be the church in the world. For us all aspects of life are built on the premise that true reality, and life that is truly human, is to be found where God is truly worshipped and served above all. Everything else is fraud.

Sadly, the position the Abbot took is one you would have to argue for in the church. But this thought provides an interpretive tool to use as we unpack the story of the Golden Calf.

It is possible to read the Exodus as though it is the Creation story of the people of Israel. The beginning of life occurred when God called Moses and promised that he and the people would one day be at liberty to worship in freedom. [In the beginning was the Word]. The crossing of the Red Sea was a gracious act in which, a people who were no people, were enabled to pass through the waters of chaos and escape the powers of death to emerge with an identity as God's people. The power that enabled this was not their own, or theirs to command. It came from God the Creator who defeated the chaos and brought them forth to new life. [God said: let there be life]. As the people journeyed further into their freedom, like Adam and Eve, they received the Commandments: the sign of God's grace that set the limits for their life. First and foremost they were to honour God as the source of their life and freedom, and were to have no other gods in the place of God.

Thinking about the Exodus in this way means that today's episode with the Golden Calf represents the Fall: the human capacity for having a short attention span in relation to the grace of God, choosing instead turn and worship a lesser god: a dead thing, made with human hands.

Because we only take small slices of the Exodus story for our worship, what is hidden from us is that in between the Commandments and the Golden Calf, and following, there is a rich description of the Tabernacle, the Tent that was a portable sanctuary made according to God's instructions. Used from Sinai to the time when Solomon built the Temple the Tabernacle was a sign that God dwelt with the people. It housed the Ark of the Covenant, and it was there Moses met with God.

The Tabernacle stood as a sign that God, who had previously been known only remotely as the one to whom Moses occasionally spoke on the Mountains, had chosen to become “God with us”. Remember that in the desert, when the people ran out of food and water, their question was: “is the Lord with us or not”? At God’s initiative, in that lonely, deprived place, something new came into being that changed the spatial and theological understanding of God. The Tabernacle symbolized God’s choice to be among the people, no longer be remote and far off. From now on God would dwell in a moveable house that travelled with the people. The Commandments and the Tabernacle stood as signs of God’s desire that, in the face of a chaotic world, the people should have all that was necessary for them to live with meaning and purpose. It meant that as the people journeyed toward the promised goal, they were always able to see and to hear that they were called to be God’s people in whom God’s word lived and shone in the world.

The instructions for the Tabernacle resonate with themes related to Creation. This means the Tabernacle represented a world within this world that through analogy and symbol pointed away from itself to the deepest realities in life. This is underlined by the fact that the Tabernacle was dedicated on the first day of the week, the day of Creation, a sign that we are not self-created. Life is a gift. This is the reality in which we stand. Perhaps now we begin to see how the Abbot could say that the monastery, where God is continually worshipped, where people live, holding all things in common, and where all work is part of a balanced life of prayer and work offered to God is the place where we find the true reality in life. And perhaps we can see how it was that Bonhoeffer found in his contact with the ancient disciplines of monasticism the basis for saying that the church is the secret centre of the world.

Let us be clear that we should not take this to mean setting out to rebuild a Tabernacle, according to the instructions given in Exodus, will solve the problems we face with worship and mission in our context. Nor should we fall into the trap of believing that having the perfect context for worship and mission, monastic or congregational will save us from the temptation of worshipping modern day versions of the Golden calf. Neither the Commandments, nor the Tabernacle, nor the Temple that came later, saved God’s people from the self indulgence of idolatry or apostasy. And yet, right worship does matter and is pleasing to God. The key is to understand what the core signs and symbols point to, and always allow that meaning to open us up to the true reality of God with us, and to refuse to bow to what is fraudulent or superficial.

In view of the Golden Calf, it is easy to link idolatry to greed for gold, but idolatry is about more than that. The Theologian Michael Northcott gave this year’s *Felix Arnott Memorial Lecture* in Sydney. His concern was with the relationship between theology and the Science of climate change. He pointed out that long before we ever thought of the term globalization, some theologians had been thinking about what it meant to live in a world that was bigger than the village, in which we were interconnected with “near and distant neighbours”. [Karl Barth, *Dogmatics III/2*] Northcott made the link between this thought and the way industrial pollution and corruption of air and water, created by the West and extended in the developing world, is having a negative effect on the livelihood of poor African farmers. He drew the conclusion from theology that this outcome is a problem of false worship. We have used the powers of technology and science to convince ourselves that we are in

charge. We are acting as though we believe there is no one else besides us and our needs, and God has been displaced. But in our arrogance and greed we are destroying the earth. We are unable to think long term and while some reap the benefits now many others suffer loss. The really sad thing is that if we refuse to change, our great grand children will be the ones most defrauded by this behaviour.

How are we to tell the difference between false worship and the real thing? For Christians, God the Creator who is to be worshipped has been made known to us in God the Son. In him God chose to tabernacle amongst us. In him, from first to last, there was no greed and no striving to be God. His was a life of self-giving symbolized in the Cross. Ironically the cross is the sign of what we did to him. But it also points us to what he did for us, and what God did for us in him. The Cross points us away from our selves to God's love for the world. Love that has reached out to us and embraced us, so that all people may come to live in the freedom and life and love we were gifted with from the beginning of time.

On our AGM day, as we confront at least one kind of fraud that has been committed amongst us, there is no better thing to be reminded of than this. The Cross of Christ is God's guarantee that there is ongoing mercy and grace on hand for us. The cross punctures all our pretensions. It undoes our quest for self-aggrandizement and power and wealth. It is this that must lead us forward into new ventures of faith and life, individually, as a Parish mission of the Uniting Church, and as members of the worldwide church of God. So may that be true for us all.

\*\*\*