**9th October 2011**

**EXODUS 32.1-14**

IPods, iphones, ipads are some of the world’s most desirable personal electronic goods. Their designer Steve jobs, died this week.

Unlike his contemporary, Microsoft's Bill Gates, Steve Jobs showed little inclination to use his personal wealth for philanthropic purposes.

And, strangely for a self-professed Buddhist, he did not embrace environmental concerns, with Apple coming under fire from Greenpeace for its reluctance to produce easily recyclable products.

The BBC website described him in the following way: Steve Jobs was a one off; a man who had total belief in his own abilities and a shortage of patience for anyone who failed to agree with him.

His great gifts were an ability to second guess the market and an eye for well designed and innovative products that everyone would buy.

"You can't just ask customers what they want and then try to give that to them," he once said. "By the time you get it built, they'll want something new."

Some see these electronic goods as the idols of our days that cry out for us to possess them. In Apple we trust! I don’t think it is as simple as that as I’ll get to in a moment.

Last week we looked at the tenth commandment ‘do not covet’. This week the theme is related - idolatry. The second commandment of course is do not worship idols. Do not worship things that are not God.

The classic biblical story of this is the one we have as our focus passage this morning in Exodus 32.

As Moses and God conversed on Mount Sinai the people became despondent, impatient, and fearful that their leader had died or abandoned them. They needed something solid, something visible, to calm their fears of the future. Their restlessness led them to demand of Aaron, second in command, for gods to lead them. A golden calf was crafted to do just that. They substituted the false for the real. The faithlessness of the people came in the moments of delay.  
  
Moses had listened as God delivered monumental directions for the lives of the people. It was a lengthy dissertation from God to Moses spanning several days, preventing Moses from coming down from the mountain. In the *Schocken Bible*, Everett Fox translates the tardiness of Moses as "shamefully-late." Can you imagine the conversations: "Where is Moses?" "What's he doing up there all this time?" "I wonder if he died up there?" "He doesn't care about us! If he did, he would be down here leading us into the Promised Land!"  
  
Delay ... how we hate it. Have you ever become impatient waiting for the council to make a decision? Have you ever become impatient with God to give you direction? Sometimes we feel God is "shamefully late" causing us anguish, consternation, discomfort, and embarrassment.   
  
The truth is God is always on time. His time table is not ours. F. B. Meyer wrote, "If God told you on the front end how long you would wait to find the fulfillment of your desire or pleasure or dream, you'd lose heart. You'd grow weary in well doing. So would I. But he doesn't. He just says, 'Wait. I keep my Word. I'm in no hurry. In the process of time I'm developing you to be ready for the promise.' "1  
  
Patience brings out the best of each soul. Promises from God are always on time. Nearness to God stops our wandering from Him, centering on Christ sheds light on our daily journey.. Don't worry about God's delay -- worry about your own delay before God!  
  
The faithlessness of the people comes in the moments of distraction. The people became impatient with Moses and his God. They needed something that would distract them from their boredom and idleness. It became painfully obvious to them that Moses was probably dead in the mountains or he would have hurried down to lead them. If Moses was dead so was his God. How quickly they had forgotten the awesome demonstration of God's power -- Moses relating the "burning bush" encounter, the ten plagues, the rescue from Egyptian slavery, the deliverance at the Sea, the revelation at Sinai of the Ten Commandments.  
  
Their false assumption leads them to distraction from God's desires to their own desires. There was a fearfulness on the part of the people toward getting too close to the divine Holy God of the universe. With Moses' delay in coming down the fear or reverence for the "Almightiness" of God subsides. The people are already tired of an "invisible" God and demand that Aaron give them a god they can see, feel, and touch. They break God's second command of not making a representation of him to worship.

It is because we cannot picture God in our minds that we are tempted to create an idol. Down through history people have made symbols to represent things they can’t see. People have argued that if images help us to worship God then they have some value. The problem is that aids to worship can become objects of worship. God knows that any image we might use to portray him would depict him as less than he truly is. Eventually we would conceive of him in ways that mirror the image we constructed. It is nearly right – but it is wrong. To fill God’s place with an image is like blotting out the sun with a 60 watt light bulb in its place.

We have the danger of treating the real God as an idol too. In coming to the real God we are coming to someone who can never be at our beck and call. God is not safe – but God is good.

The living God if free and active. This comes over again and again in scripture and in the life of Jesus. There is independence about Jesus that we can and ought to find disturbing. This parable in Matthew gospel is disturbing about the wedding feast – who gets invited and what happens to those who don’t respond and even those who do but are not properly dressed. Can’t look into it now – but want to know more come to the Quarry this afternoon.

We all need to remember that God is free and active. One of the dangers of the Christian faith is that we can acquire a certain view of God and how God works and cling to it. These images or ideas are formed through experiences and teaching. They are often good and right ideas and were probably God given. The trouble can be that we let them set the agenda for how God must work again; we hold on to past experiences and just look for repeats. We look back at wonderful times in the church and use them as a criteria for whether God is at work today... if something doesn’t fit the pattern, then we reject it. You can turn all these things into idols and because of this idolatry new and good things can be rejected.

Now I am not saying that new things and novel things are proof that God is working in a situation. What I am saying is that we are dealing with a God who is living , who is more real and alive than we can ever imagine. We cannot put God in a box and treat God as a tame idol.

Because the Hebrew word for God could also be translated as ‘gods’ there is scholarly debate as to whether the Israelites made a graven image of their God – in other words they broke the second commandment – or whether they made an image of other gods – in which case they were worshipping other gods – thereby breaking the first commandment.

What is an idol? In many ways the golden calf is too blunt and obvious. Idols do not have to be figures made of gold or stone. I suspect that some of the most powerful idols exist only in the mind.

Idolatry is where something – anything – takes the place of God in the central place of our lives. People replace God with money, possessions, careers, holidays, sport, music, sex, power or almost anything else. An idol is what people live for. An idol is what fills the mind when we lie awake at night. Idols are what we spend our time money and energy on. Idolatry occurs when we hold any value, idea or activity higher than God.

Idolatry is attractive for a couple of reasons.

The first thing to say about idols are that they are not basically evil. In fact the most dangerous idols are actually good things that have been twisted. Think of the things I just listed as being potential idols: money, possessions, careers, sport, and sex. Not a single one of them is bad – they are all good and are all gifts of God. And as good things they retain their attraction to us. In fact it is the very best things that make the most tempting idols.

Consider churches: fine preaching, great buildings, music groups, organs, correct theology are all good things and there is no reason why we can’t take pride in them. But it is all too easy for them to acquire a distorted prominence. When they do, we can start to hear contemptuous voices saying how inferior those churches are that lack those things. At this point such things cease to be good and they have started to become idols. When finally they become the focus of what we are and what we stand for as churches, they become our faith itself. At that point then I feel that God tends to leave quietly by the back door. God doesn’t share his worship with any idols.

The other attraction is that idols are generally tame gods that you can keep at arm’s length. They rarely insist for example that you give up adultery, lying or theft. But God does. They rarely react with such fury and anger as God does to Moses in this passage.

Neither Moses nor God seemed to want the Israelties at this point, despite all the work they had just been doing on their behalf. Consider the subtle humour betrayed in the text as each seems intent on blaming the other for the excesses of these backsliders.  
  
"The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! ***Your people***, whom ***you*** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely…'" (Ex. 32:7).   
  
To which Moses, not willing to be held solely responsible, ups the ante with his bold response:   
  
"O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against ***your people***, whom ***you*** brought out of the land of Egypt ***with great power and a mighty hand***?" (Ex. 32:11).  
  
I've been in meetings like this, when someone's best-laid plans have come to naught and there needs to be a fall guy to make things right. It's also a common strategy among parents: "Have you seen your son's report card?" It's amazing that anything ever gets done with so much blame being passed around.   
  
But the exasperation of both Moses and God is understandable, for it had only been a short time ago when the Israelites gave their solemn pledge to the conditions of the covenant: "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex. 24:3b). Such big plans. Such high aspirations. But this was before the forty-day summit. In the absence of their teacher and leader, it was not long before the men started getting grumpy and the women began fiddling with their earrings.   
  
Contrasted to Israel's faithlessness is the faith of Moses. Moses' faith is demonstrated through his intercession with God on the people's behalf.  
  
The people rebelled against God, ultimately. Their foreplay of creating the god of the golden calf was preceded by sexual orgies which accompanied fertility rites. Their apostasy led them to actions of irresponsible immorality. Faithlessness to God leads to a diminishing of moral sensitivity. No God, no absolutes. No judgement, just relative values and what you can get away with.

Moses knows this isn’t the case but still stands in the breach and intercedes for the faithless Israelites.  
  
Do we as God's people rally and intercede for a world steeped in its own lust and moral decay. A call for many Moseses who know how to pray intercessory prayers on the world's behalf is desperately needed.  
  
What must the Christian intercede for today? The answer is for the salvation of the lost, the healing of the sick, the hope of the hopeless, the action of the inactive, the power of the powerless, justice for those deprived if justice, integrity where there is corruption, the will of God, and the Kingdom of the King.  
  
Moses' love is demonstrated through his compassion and concern. Moses saw the Israelites' pitiful spiritual illness and wanted to help them. There was a yearning in his heart that they be spared -- even in their foolish state of mind and heart. Moses genuinely was touched by their lack of spiritual understanding and attempted to do something about it.

The theology in the story is the old question about what you do about rebelliousness and sin. Do you abandon the people, destroy them and start again – a bit like the Noah story. But God cannot abandon them – especially as Moses reminds him he has just bothered to save them from Pharaoh. God is torn between the obligation to bring punishment and to cast off, and the obligation to bring mercy. Mercy wins. Thank God.  
  
Who today needs to be shown mercy? Is it a friend, a family member, a stranger on the streets -- who? Is the Spirit of God giving you a heart of compassion for them?

This exchange is a startling story about prayer. It seems to suggest that Moses regards prayer not about conforming our will to God’s but about conforming God’s will to our will; or rather Moses knows that God’s will is not always fixed and can be persuaded to bend towards mercy.

Moses 'implores' God. (The Hebrew verb means, literally, 'make someone's face sweet or pleasant.' I remember the sight of a little child reaching up with her hands to push her mother's angry face into the shape of a smile.)"

Moses models for modern leaders how to deal with faithless followers. Moses is remembered as the prophetic leader who had a direct and dynamic relationship with God. They argue, they commiserate, they cajole, they rant, and they care. A healthy relationship with the Holy can include all that and much more. God loves: perhaps God’s anger, judgment, and repentance are all grounded in the reality that the creation is beloved of God.

This passage is about ultimate matters. The first and second commandment. I am the Lord your God. Thou shalt have no other gods but me. Do not make any idols or graven images. May God help us all to stay faithful and find the freedom of life that the Ten Commandments tries to direct us in.

**EXODUS 32 1-14: IDOLATRY**

Last week we looked at the tenth commandment ‘do not covet’. This week the theme is related - idolatry. The second commandment of course is do not worship idols. Do not worship things that are not God.

The classic biblical story of this is the one we have as our focus passage this morning in Exodus 32.

Even as God was giving the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Israelites were breaking them. Moses we are told, had been up the mountain for some days and the people were frustrated and impatient with waiting for God. They wanted something instant and immediate. So Aaron, Moses brother and co-leader of the Israelites, got them to melt down their jewellery, cast it into a golden calf and presented it to the people as a substitute focus for their worship.

It is because we cannot picture God in our minds that we are tempted to create an idol. Down through history people have made symbols to represent things they can’t see. People have argued that if images help us to worship God then they have some value. The problem is that aids to worship can become objects of worship. God knows that any image we might use to portray him would depict him as less than he truly is. Eventually we would conceive of him in ways that mirror the image we constructed. It is nearly right – but it is wrong. To fill God’s place with n image is like blotting out the sun with a 60 watt light bulb in its place.

The Israelites were also probably afraid. Fear, as we found last week in the commandment not to covet, is a driving factor in worshipping idols. It was forty days and nights that Moses had been gone. Was he coming back? Had he deserted them? Had God therefore deserted them? Were they on their own now – here in the wilderness? How would they survive? Better make do with what they could find and control. Make gods in their own image – gods who would be reliable and always there and controllable.

There is an extraordinary bewilderment about whether we in Britain worship one god, many gods or no gods at all. For most of the last 1500 years this hasn’t been an issue. Christianity wads dominant and all questions and issues related to how we worshipped the God of the Bible. We are now in a post Christina society. Yet religion is alive and well. We now have sizeable Muslim, Sikh, Hindu populations. We also have a second phenomenon which could be generally summarized as ‘new age religion’. Akin to a shopping mall of a thousand beliefs, new age is hard to classify. Apart from where it grades into Buddhism and Hinduism, new age is a very informal belief; after all one of its attractions is that you can do what you want. Whether its meditation, feng shui, reincarnation, angels, astrology, crystals, tarot or reiki, it’s all on offer today and you can pick and mix to suit yourself. In the spiritual haze of modern Britain commentators have suggested that three linked features stand out:

A widespread rejection of any sort of authority in the religious area. ‘I’ll believe what I want’ people say proudly. Which links into the second feature: a preference for spiritual beliefs that are undemanding. Religion today is presented as some sort of lifestyle option, like keep fit or gardening. It is simply the spiritual dimension to life; if you need some fulfilment, and then take some spirituality on. Christianity, people protest, is narrow and oppressive because it denies so much. It makes ethical demands; it says ‘do this’ and don’t do that’. Perhaps the Israelites at the bottom of Mount Sinai are thinking ‘Moses has been away for a long time’ – imagine how many commandments he is taking down. Think about all that we will have to do. Do we want this God? Let’s make our own’.

The third feature of modern religion is a widespread tolerance that wants nothing ruled out. ‘It may not be for me but we’d better not knock it.’ One of the few New Age commandments is ‘thou shalt not say ‘thou shalt not’. People want a religion they can tailor to suit their own circumstances. . The girl Guides revised their promises a while back from doing my duty to God to doing my duty to my God. I understand why they did it – but one can still reflect that that new tow letter word ‘my’ covers a vast difference.

What is an idol? In many ways the golden calf is too blunt and obvious. Idols do not have to be figures made of gold or stone. I suspect that some of the most powerful idols exist only in the mind.

Idolatry is where something – anything – takes the place of God in the central place of our lives. Christians should make the following statements about God:

God gives purpose, meaning and direction and fulfilment to their lives.

God governs the way they act

God is the focal point around which c their existence hangs

Thoughts of God comforts them when they are down

You get the picture? Now idolatry is where something – anything – takes the pace of God in this central position. Replace God with money, possessions, careers, holidays, sport, music, sex, power or almost anything else. An idol is what people live for. An idol is what fills the mind when we lie awake at night. Idols are what we spend our time money and energy on. Idolatry occurs when we hold any value, idea or activity higher than God.

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The other attraction is that idols are generally tame gods that you can keep at arm’s length. They rarely insist for example that you give up adultery, lying or theft. But God does. They rarely react with such fury and anger as God does to Moses in this passage. He disowns them – instead of saying they are his people he says to Moses ‘your people’. God calls them stubborn, stiff necked and threatens to pour out his anger on them. These may be uncomfortable images of God in the Bible, but scripture is trying to convey the passionate side of God who is disturbed by sin and who consequently is disturbing.

We have the danger of treating the real God as an idol too. In coming to the real God we are coming to someone who never be at our beck and call. God is not safe – but God is good.

The living God if free and active and cannot be manipulated by us. This comes over again and again in scripture and in the life of Jesus. There is independence about Jesus that we can and ought to find disturbing. This parable in Matthew gospel is disturbing about the wedding feast – who gets invited and what happens to those who don’t respond and even those who do but are not properly dressed. Can’t look into it now – but want to know more come to the quarry this afternoon.

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The Ten Commandments are given for our benefit not for God’s. He is against idolatry not just because it robs him of his rightful worship but because it is hurtful to us. Like all the commandments God has our best interest at heart. Idolatry hurts us in two ways:

It cheats and destroys those who practice it and secondly it steals from us the most precious thing we can have: knowledge of the living God.

Idols lie: the idol of possessions tells us to shop until we drop but then we still want some more. The idol of sex may mean we spend our lives in a futile and dangerous and ever more draining hunt for sexual fulfilment. The idol of the body tells us that if we serve it it will make us the gods and goddesses that we want to look like. But it never does. The god of power thunders at us that if we serve it it will give us the freedom to do whatever we want, whenever we want. But it never does. Idols are cruel masters. We think they may serve us but in fact it is usually the other way round. In fact one of the tests as to whether you have any idols is how easy can you give them up? If you can give them up easily then they are unlikely to be idols. Nothing insults idols quite so much as giving them away.

How do you confront idolatry today? Recognise the double danger. There are two opposite dangers in confronting idolatry.

The first danger is that of simply giving up. Faced with overwhelming pressure from our culture to worship such things as possessions, power, sex, we could just shrug our shoulders and go into defeat. Our only hope is to preserve an idol free hour on Sunday morning.

The second danger is subtler. It is to look at what the idolatry centres on and reject it. Is sex being worshipped? Then the response it to be against sex. Is meditation being made God? Then the response is to reject anything in our worship that is contemplative. Is sport becoming an idol? Then the response is to preach against it and be suspicious of anyone in the congregation wearing trainers! This strategy will hurt us more than it hurts the idols. Such an approach has the habit of making Christians seem joyless and negative; they are always against something. The Puritans were for pure worship but they often threw the baby out with the bath water. Don’t reject what is good for us simply because it’s been abused. The answerto wrong use is not no use but right use.

The former Bishop of Durham TomWright talks about a discovery he made which helps us address the question as to what we should do to confront idolatry. He tells that when the first Christians arrived in Britain, like the Celtic saints, and started to build places of worship, they chose to build them on sites that pagans used for worship. Why did they choose to build on top of places where there had been temples and shrines to pagan gods? Was it because there was something special about those places? No it wasn’t. Rather it was a conscious decision to say something about Christianity; that the call to us is to worship God in places where idols are worshipped. It is to plant the flag for God in hostile soil, to claim the good things of God for him, to proclaim that only under the loving and gracious gaze of God can everything be held in the right balance and with the right perspective..

Instead of running away scared or looking around seeking what we can reject because it has been contaminated by idolaters, this gives an alternative. Of course it’s harder work but then most good ideas are.

For example bodies can be an idol – people can be obsessed with how they look and whether they are fit and healthy and conform to expectations. Planting God’s flag here will affirm what is good about that attitude – healthy bodies are important and we need to take care of ourselves. However our bodies won’t last forever. We are all made in the image of God who values each one of us regardless of what we look like. And what God seeks most of all is not outward looks but an inner spiritual beauty. Only that is of eternal value.

Power – is important to get things done- but planting the flag of God in the midst will always question our motives. Are we seeking power to serve God and do good for others? Are we accountable? Do we match up to the way Jesus exercised power - in other words rejecting corruption and idolatry of power and using power to serve others?

Possessions – creation is good and we can count our blessings so long as we are not controlled by our possessions and the need to acquire more. Can we hold lightly onto them?

God knows that the images offered by the world are bankrupt and if we pursue them we will find ourselves disappointed, devastated and worthless. The false gods only take, take and take. The true and living God gives, gives and gives again. Worship him and him only.