

EXODUS 32.1-14

Harvest is a time to give thanks for everything that we have, to be grateful for everything that we have and to work for a world where no one is in need.

As Christians we give thanks to God for all that we have and we look to God for our sense of justice, worth, equality fairness and standards.

Looking to God is something that most people in our society don't consciously do today. Maybe people are too comfortable and affluent – they don't need God they have all they need for a good life, so they think.

But a lot of people catch themselves saying 'Thank God' when something good happens to them or they are relieved at some news. Or the reverse when something bad happens - who do you blame/

I knew a bloke who was your rough and ready type, macho and certainly not one to darken the doors of a church – real men didn't need a crutch of religion to lean on he used to say. Yet he found himself looking up to the stars in the sky and wondering in awe at the universe, sensing there was someone, something behind it all, that there was a reason why there is something and not nothing. That curiosity and openness led him to discover faith in God and to come eventually into church.

What is God like? There was an old joke of a little girl with crayons in her hand doing a drawing. Her mummy said what are you drawing honey? She replied 'I'm drawing God'. Her mother said 'but no one knows what God is like'.

@They will when they see my drawing' said the little girl.

The God we give thanks to for the harvest, for creating us and sustaining life is mighty and mysterious but we claim has revealed themselves in creation, and to a people and then in the person of Jesus.

The Bible claims that God choose a people to reveal God's ways and purposes to in order for that people to be a light to other nations and show them how to live free and fulfilled lives.

We have been following that story in the last month in our bible readings tracing the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery to the promised land.

Last week we looked at the giving of the ten Commandments, which I suggested was born out of a relationship with God who desired that the people of God did not live in ways of oppression and exploitation again as they did in

slavery in Egypt. They had to follow God not Pharoah. Relationship is the key. Rules without relationship will always be legalistic and lead to defiance. This was a relationship of trust not rebellion.

The biblical claim of God choosing a people is controversial. The Jews were and still are the chosen people but that choice has caused strife. The Green Party, who I thought was all about the environment and trying to turn the country greener, seems to have become obsessed with the Palestine issue. Their party conference this week voted in favour of a motion that Zionism is racism, a form of feeling superior to others and entitled to the land of Palestine. Scottish Greens co-leader Ross Greer has defended the position. He said he considered Zionism to be racist and described the creation of Israel as "an act of racism" and "an act of ethnic cleansing".

He said: "You cannot give superior rights in law to one ethnic or religious group. Everybody has to be treated equally before the law."

Mr Greer, who is a Christian and a member of the Church of Scotland, said he wanted "Jews, Christians, Muslims, Israelis, Palestinians, everybody to live equally in safety, in peace".

There is a spiritual issue. In that according to the Bible God has chosen the Jews and given them land. It was a promise given to Moses (read Exodus 6) that they would escape slavery and be given the land to protect them and help them feel secure.

Does God have favourites? We all know if you have siblings and you sense your parents had favourites it would breed rivalry and resentment.

Why do some people hate the Jews? Why is this Palestine issue so central and consuming for some people? There are so many other conflicts injustices and rivalries in the world – what makes this one so consuming?

It is troubling to think that God has favourites! If a school teacher had favourites we would say that's unfair. If a head teacher chooses someone to show visitors around the school there may be a particular point to that that may have nothing to do with favouritism. Similarly if the teacher appointed a pupil to organise a visit to an old person home or captain a school team we might say that was entirely appropriate. In such examples people are not chosen for privilege or

any selfish reason, they are being chosen to do a particular job in order that the whole community may benefit.

Likewise in scripture, the bible story says the people of Israel were chosen not because of their moral qualities, that they are better than the rest, indeed scripture keeps testifying how they kept messing up, this story we are looking at is a case in point, but how God keeps faith with them and forgives them time and time again. No, they are chosen for a particular task – to be a light for the nations of how to live well. That they forget that task, that they mess up, that they get arrogant and do awful things is a constant theme.

That they believe God to be like them, argumentative, angry, vindictive but also forgiving, faithful, merciful, is evident in the pages of the Old testament. Christians believe it needed Jesus to show up to reveal the fullness of God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth (as John put it in his gospel 1.14 – which we hear every year at Christmas).

In the bible story we have to consider today it reveals an angry side to God that we may be uncomfortable with – but I would suggest it is the very human understanding of God.

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. Moses is "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. It's just that God's 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 fulfilment 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.' "

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.. With Moses' delay in coming down the mountain, 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.

I have a lot of sympathy for the Israelites demanding a tangible God they can touch and see rather than an invisible God. The sceptics and the atheists will always mock people of faith who believe in an imaginary and invisible friend. We don't have hard proof of God's existence and we often don't get the chance to tell our story of perhaps prayers answered, sustaining hope in difficult times, maybe spiritual encounters and experiences that we can't explain. Nothing frustratingly coercive – but persuasive to us but sadly not to others. Sometimes faith can be difficult to grasp for someone who wants something they can feel and touch and see.

Hence our golden calves.

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.

An ex girlfriend thought that football was my idol. It was 1987 and I was at university and my girlfriend at the time thought I was too obsessed with Burnley football club. They were more important to my life than Jesus.

Burnley then were bottom of the fourth division. We had to win our final game and hope the other team lost. We were winning but the other team were drawing until a dog ran on the pitch and suspended play and in injury time the opposition scored meaning that we were safe. It was the only time I kissed my brother. But I had made a deal with God before the game. I said Burnley would not be an idol for me win or lose. It's only a game.

Idolatry is attractive for a couple of reasons.

The first thing to say about idols is 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 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 Israelites 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.

*Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.
¹³ Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'*

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. That is what we testify to at harvest time.

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.