

The Golden Calf and Idolatry

Exodus 32. 1 – 14

Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways.

The Israelites were foolish. They were the chosen people of the one true God and they still turned to a golden idol, an inanimate object to go before them.

The Reformation saw the stripping of iconic and so called idolatry objects from churches. The people were to focus on God alone and not be distracted by things, objects that might become an alternative focus of worship. And so the early Protestant churches were sparse and simple – no altar and no candles other than to provide necessary light, no incense and no crucifix, no statues and no paintings, no colourful priestly robes.

Some people are uneasy about some of these things slipping back into our churches – candles and banners and the occasional coloured shirt or blouse or cassock!

But we are not re-introducing idols. In fact, idols and idolatry sound a bit dated, a bit Old Testament. We might laugh at the thought of bowing down to a golden calf.

Idolatry does, however, still exist. Idols are still alive and well even if a bit different.

I attended CLAN women in Edinburgh last week over two days – Christians Linked Across the Nation. I was delighted that a dozen women from Kirknewton and East Calder took part for some or all of the gathering. Idolatry featured strongly on both days.

Maggie Lane was one of the main speakers. She is minister at Kirkliston Parish Church. She has an amazing testimony of drowning in the sea at Elat in Israel a few years ago trying to save her brother from drowning, being in a coma for three days and during that time finding herself in heaven and in the presence of Jesus. Many of you have heard her testimony when she came here to speak. I have copies of the DVD she made telling the full account of her experience.

She wanted to stay in heaven but she was sent back, with a message.

She said that Jesus said to her **“There is idolatry in my church and my people are unaware of how badly they are affected by a host of idols.”**

She said that the church has become obsessed with debating the issue of homosexuality amongst those who serve as leaders and this has distracted the church from addressing the real problems of idolatry within the church - there is pornography in the church, amongst leaders and pastors and teachers, there is sexual immorality at every level, there is materialism and the love of comfort and money. There is spiritual pride and a love of gossip and slander and self-promotion; people have become lovers of themselves.

I believe Maggie to be a woman of integrity, firmly grounded, not seeking attention for herself. Whatever you might think about the source of her message, her words are a wake up call to the church, as a body and as individuals within that body.

Maggie’s personal idol, she discovered, was food, eating for comfort rather than turn to God in times of anxiety or stress or loneliness. Not trusting in the grace of God to meet her needs.

You see, idolatry extends beyond the worship of graven images and false gods. Our modern idols are many and varied. Even for those who do not bow physically before a statue, idolatry is a matter of the heart—pride, self-centeredness, greed, gluttony, a love for possessions and ultimately rebellion against God. Is it any wonder that God hates it?

Idolatry is a barrier between us and God’s grace. In his prayer from the darkness Jonah said

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs (Jonah 2 :8)

Anything that we love more than God Himself could be considered an idol. Every fallen culture has its idols, and we must be particularly sensitive to what the world is calling us to worship in place of the one true God. Neither sex nor power nor fame nor anything else deserves primacy in our lives, for none of these

things is transcendent or divine or holy—none is the Lord and Creator of all.

Anything that takes up our time and our attention and distracts us from God can become an idol.

Anything or anyone can become an idol in our lives because whatever we love more than the Lord is, by definition, an idol. Calvin taught us that our hearts are what he called idol factories. We are all continually tempted to make temporal things into ultimate things, and so we must be on guard against idolatry in our lives. We should periodically assess the state of our hearts to see what we may have turned into an idol.

And if we are quoting the reformation heavy weights, Martin Luther said **“whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God.”**

Of course, Calvin and Luther knew their bible. They knew that Jesus said -

Matthew 6 : 24 **“No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”**

And Paul said in his letter to the Colossians -

Colossians 3 : 5 – **Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.**

Similar sentiments are found in Ephesians 5 where it goes on to say **For of this you can be sure, no immoral, impure or greedy person – such a person is an idolator – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God** (Ephesians 5 : 5)

Most of us realize that enjoying anything other than God, from the best gift to the basest pleasure, can become idolatry. Now there is nothing wrong with enjoyment and pleasure, nothing at all. But when that thing, whatever it is, becomes all consuming, when it is something we cannot give up, when it takes up a disproportionate amount of our time, when it does not glorify God, when it is something we might want to hide from God, when it is self-indulgent,

then that thing might have become an idol.

Idolatry will threaten to destroy our relationship with God. And it will destroy our relationships with people.

What makes an enjoyment idolatrous? What turns a desire into covetousness, which is idolatry?

One sign that an enjoyment is becoming idolatrous is when it is forbidden by God. For example, adultery and stealing and lying are forbidden by God. Some people at some times feel that these are pleasurable or else they would not do them. But such pleasure in forbidden things is a sign of idolatry.

Great desire for things that are not great is a sign that we are beginning to make those things idols.

Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it draws us away from good things we should be doing. When we find ourselves spending time pursuing an enjoyment, knowing that other things or people should be getting our attention, we are moving into idolatry.

Hearing about these things at CLAN, God drew my attention to the amount of time I was spending most days on newspaper puzzles! I have done the cryptic crossword in the Scotsman for almost 40 years! Some time ago I started to do the smaller crossword and the Suduko as well. The Scotsman introduced more puzzles. Michael gets other newspapers and I discovered some other puzzles in these papers too. Any spare moment I was picking up a puzzle, at the breakfast table, lunchtime, with a coffee, even taking the last undone puzzles to bed. This was eating into time when I should have been reading my bible or having a quiet time with God or just doing something more worthwhile and fulfilling. And I felt challenged about that and I have addressed it. I am back to one a day, not five a day... or more! Life has a better balance.

Some obsessive and compulsive and addictive behaviours are more harmful and damaging to self and to others. There was an interesting seminar in the CLAN programme entitled "Women and Porn." It was billed as being of interest to women who are addicted to

pornography (we were told that 1 in 3 people who access pornography on the internet are women), it was of interest to women whose husbands are addicted to pornography and to women who have concerns about protecting their children and grandchildren from pornography particularly on the internet.

Some 40 women attended. One of the speakers was a brave woman who was speaking publicly for the first time under the auspices of a charity called CARE whose aim is to help victims of pornography and warn young people against becoming involved.

Elizabeth is about 30 years old and is married with a six year old child. She spoke about marrying the man of her dreams and discovering within weeks of their wedding that he was addicted to viewing pornography on the internet. This had a huge impact on her feelings towards her husband and her feelings about herself. He kept promising to stop but then relapsed. Pornography had become her husband's idol and he resisted giving it up. He rationalized it, he told her it was normal, he tried to get her to participate as well but she would not. She felt angry and betrayed and unloved.

Both Elizabeth and her husband became Christians. They heard the words of Jesus in Matthew 5 : 28 where he said "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." They spoke with their pastor and to counsellors about the problem and Elizabeth said that for two years her husband had been free from pornography and his faith in God had grown. She had hoped to end her story on a positive note but two weeks ago, five days before coming to the conference, she discovered that her husband had been accessing internet pornography again. He is full of remorse and is a broken man having let down not only his wife and family but others who have tried to help him. This time Elizabeth said that she feels only sympathy for him, that this idol has risen up again to consume him. She will continue on this journey with him although you could sense her despair and fear for the future.

She is being Christ-like in her response to this challenge. It is a new testament response to sin and idolatry.

In the Old Testament, in Exodus, God's wrath would have been

unleashed on the people who had worshipped the golden calf. But Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the people and God relented. Nevertheless, 3000 Israelites were killed by the sword and not one of them was permitted to enter the promised land. They were to wander in the wilderness for another generation and their children and grandchildren inherited the land that would have been theirs.

But we are New Testament children. We live under the new covenant with Jesus Christ who died for the sins of the world. Jesus took the cup of wine at the last supper and said **“This cup is a sign of the new covenant sealed by my blood.”**

And so we can bring our sins and our idols and our brokenness and our shame and lay them at the foot of the cross where Christ took these sins upon himself.

In Romans 8 : 34 we read **Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us**

In the letter to the Hebrews it says **“Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them. (Hebrews 7 : 25).**

1 John 5:21, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

Let us all prayerfully ask Jesus to purify our hearts, to cleanse us from within, to help us to live holy lives.

We sing together mission praise 921 Purify my heart.