

Exodus 32: 1 "Make gods for us"

The picture on the Order of Service was in the news six years ago. It is was painted in 1634 by the great French painter Nicolas Poussin; it hangs in the National Gallery in London. It is called "the Adoration of the Golden Calf": its theme is the story we heard this morning. The people who have been set free from Egyptian slavery find themselves wandering in a wilderness and become really fed up with God. So, while Moses their leader has gone away, they cry out to his brother Aaron "Make gods for us" "Make gods for us that are real, that we can see, make gods for us". So Aaron makes a golden calf: and the people celebrate like mad.

Poussin's picture was in the news a while ago. Someone vandalised it: red paint was sprayed over it. Why would anyone do such a thing? Could it be simple opportunism, finding the Poussin room empty of visitors and supervisors alike? Or the action of a person suffering a severe bout of mental illness? Maybe someone had read that this very same picture in the very same place had been attacked with a knife thirty years before and this was a copy-cat crime (for crime, of course, it is).

At the time the red paint was sprayed on the painting two other more interesting explanations were offered. Those of you who have read the Dan Brown books like "The da Vinci Code" will know that the paintings of Poussin have long been a favourite hunting ground for secret messages and signs of mystery for those who form conspiracy theories about The Holy Grail and Rosicrucianism and Roslin Chapel. I'm more interested in the explanation which was offered in a newspaper at the time of the vandalism. A well-known art critic wrote: *It is about the forces that can destroy civilisation*. Is it possible that a painting could be

such a challenging painting that someone might want to destroy it?
What is the Bible story of the golden Calf about?

They did not want for drama in those days. They had escaped from slavery in Egypt because they had followed Moses. They had marched and marched until they came to the great hill, Mount Sinai. And there the nation had been born. There Moses and the people were met by God who made his promise to them that he would be their God and they would be his people. There on Mount Sinai they were given the Law, the Ten Commandments, the sign of the bond – they called it the covenant - between the Lord God Almighty and them, God's special people. All this done in great excitement and smoke on the mountain and clouds and fire and the voice of the living God himself. Religion was not dull, these days.

Then Moses left. The great leader, the one who spoke to them on God's behalf and spoke to God on their behalf, he left. They were suddenly alone. Soon they were anxious, unsettled, frightened. No sign of Moses. No word from God. They had been abandoned. They felt very insecure indeed now that they had lost God. So they turned to Moses' brother Aaron and shouted "Make gods for us". "Make real gods for us". As you see in the picture, Aaron made for them a golden calf, and they leapt about in delight and dancing.

"This faith in God is too difficult for us", they complained. This faith in God whom we never see and never hear. This faith in God is too difficult when we are left alone, when Moses who led us to God has gone away, it is too risky, too hard for us. Give us something real, something we can see. Anything but God! So they worship a golden calf. ABG. Anything but God.

Of course every last one of them remembered the commandments they had been given. The dust had hardly been brushed off the tablets

of stone. As they gazed in delight at the golden calf there is not one of them who could not hear in their inner ears the second of these Ten Commandments. *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.* ⁵ *You shall not bow down to them or worship them.* All that God asks of them is their obedience. No idols. And they find themselves worshipping a golden calf. ABG. Anything but God. It's too hard for us.

That sin has been the classic sin of religious people ever since. Anything but God. We can't see God. We don't know what God's voice sounds like. Most of the time we have no idea what God does. As soon as we think we begin to grasp something about God it becomes unclear and contradictory. The bits we do know and understand are far too costly anyway. Who wants to live the way God wants us to live? No-one understands the terrible problems of evil and the God of love. It's all too hard. Anything but God. Anything but walking bravely and determinedly in the way of faith.

It is because the way of faith is so challenging that religious people build golden calves of their own. Two Sundays from now we will be marking here the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. You find golden calves on both sides of that historic divide. On the Catholic side you will find that the adventure and risk of believing in God is diminished into a confidence in the rightness of the church. Don't worry about what your conscience tells you. Don't worry about the lack of personal commitment in your own lives. Don't worry about feeling that God is hard to grasp. Just trust in the church: trust in the church with its traditions and its rules and its ceremonies and its scriptures. Don't worry about seeking and searching for a personal faith in the Creator who made you: let the church take the strain. That will be just fine for you. ABG. Anything but God.

And on the Protestant side, the tradition in which the Church of Scotland stands, it is still so often ABG. Here, however, the golden calf takes on the shape of a Bible. Tragically, the Bible often just gets in the way of real faith in God. Often it does get in the way of believing in God because it lies unread in many a home, unread for years. And often it gets in the way of believing in God as it takes the shape of a golden calf which diverts us away from faith. The tremendous risk of believing in God, the great leap of faith, is diminished into a confidence in the rightness of the Bible. How often have you heard “If the Bible says it it must be true”; and with these words faith in God, the searching, exciting, thrilling, costly adventure of trusting in God is replaced by a search for the appropriate text or the inspired passage. Trust in the living God is replaced by certainty in a book. . Don’t worry about seeking and searching for a personal faith in the Creator who made you: let the Bible take the strain. The Bible is very important and very precious, but not if it gets in the way of loving God and loving our neighbor.

Anything but God. A golden calf does not demand anything of you. A golden calf, a golden church, a golden book, these are all easier than the God who is God. But only the God who is God is real. Only the God who is God gave life to the universe and put the stars in space and placed us on the earth to care for it. Only the God who is God came among us as our companion on the way in a human being born in Nazareth and crucified at Calvary. Only God shared our suffering. Only the one true God loved you and gave himself for you. Only the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will redeem the world from its suffering and shame. No golden book, no golden church, no golden calf will ever forgive your sins or heal your hurt. or bring you at the last to where there is no more death, neither sorrow not crying.

Do not trust in whatever golden calf you keep building for yourself. OG. Only God.

