

The gods of today

Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1; Luke 16:1-13

As a child I was fascinated with books and the whole process of learning – apart from maths and science, which have always remained beyond me. Someone gave me the Reader's Digest Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary – a three-volume affair bound in red leather. I still have them. The first two volumes are the traditional dictionary, the third volume is a compendium of different fields of interest – The Arts, Architecture, Government, Language, Foreign Phrases, Rhyming Slang, the Sciences, Names, Medicine and Sport.

There was one section that fascinated me – it was called Mythology and Religions, and it gave information about classical myths and legends, as well as the different religions of the world. So many gods and goddesses. So many characters and stories. So much potential for confusion or distraction. Greek gods the same as Roman gods. The Hindu gods and the Norse gods and the gods of the native Americans. A plethora of deities.

Of course, gods come in many shapes, sizes and forms outside the classical and spiritual norms. Jesus challenges His listeners to work out where their loyalties lie when it comes to the gods of their day, personifying the worship of money and material possessions, or mammon as He called it. That was first century Palestine, but it holds true for our world today.

Mark Oakley, the Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in London, in his wonderful new book about faith and poetry called, *The Splash of Words*, writes about four 'gods' in our day that are alive and kicking.¹

"The first god alive and well today is called 'Gloss', the goddess of beauty and surfaces – a fickle being, incarnated in paper and adverts, a god so big she makes us all feel small and ugly. We are drawn by her siren voice but her perfection is impossible even for those who anoint themselves with her many sensuous creams and labels. She is cunning too – she makes humans confuse their wants with their needs, and this leads to many tears..." She is from the shallow end of the swimming pool of the gods of today, no depth, no roots, no lasting

connection, just endless, endless temptation. We look around the world and we see the god of temptation worshipped everywhere.

“Obese’ is the god of gathering, or acquiring, who is never satisfied: happiness for him is having what you want, not wanting what you have; and he always wants more, even when bloated. Although people say he is seen on earth at the moment in the form of bankers, in fact he is found in the hearts of all those of us who have forgotten that the best things in life are never things, and that there is always a price to be paid when everything has a price. He is related to that great god who makes us by things we don’t, called Ikea (mainly worshipped on a Saturday). Together they magic us into spending money we don’t have on things we don’t want in order to impress people we don’t like. We look around the world and we see the god of greed worshipped everywhere.

‘Instantaneous’ is the goddess of now. She cannot wait. She must have fast cars, fast food, fast money, fast death. She is blind, never having the time to stop and see anything. She often gets into a mess...because she never has the patience to listen to anyone else. She beckons people to live full lives but strangely leaves them feeling empty. She is afraid of people meeting face to face in case they discover the joys of wasting time together, and so she invents screens and devices that trick us into thinking we are communicating but which actually add to our loneliness and sense of isolation. Interesting word, screen, isn’t it? We look around the world and we see the god of instant gratification worshipped everywhere.

Finally there is ‘Punch’, the god of violence and division. If hate can be escalated, he’ll have a go- if they don’t agree with you, lash out. If they’re different, slap them down. If they’re not in the majority, don’t invite them. When in doubt, just punch them.” We look around at the world and we see the god of violence being worshipped everywhere.

The gods of today. Subtle or blatant; specialised or commonplace; each one seeks in some way or other to infiltrate our hearts and minds, and, not only for the people of faith, but for all people. Sometimes we catch ourselves in the mirror and regret what we have become. We recognise we have quite a lot to live with but not a great deal to live for.

Throughout all of this, the God Who is in Jesus Christ holds firm, and steady, and persistent, and gracious. The God Who is in Jesus Christ faces down the gods of today, temptation, greed, instant gratification, violence, selfishness, fearfulness, addiction, the whole panoply of contemporary deities, and says, “No, this is what you are like, this is the real you, this is what is within you”, and holds up a mirror so that we might see, however fractured, however distorted.

In the Creation story poetry in the Book of Genesis, when we read this poetic imagining of how the world was shaped and how people sought to see how the reality of God was woven into creation, we read: “Then God said, let us make man in our image, after our own likeness...”ⁱⁱ

The way we are supposed to look, the image we are supposed to bear, or perhaps better, the kind of people we are supposed to be, is that of God in Jesus. The thoughts, the words, the actions of our living is supposed to be in the image of Jesus. Not blotted out by the gods of today who distract and distort and attempt to lead us away.

The Spirit that we are supposed to live out is not one of the gods of temptation, or greed, or self-gratification or violence, but of love and joy and peace, of patience, kindness, goodness, of faithfulness, of gentleness and of self-control. These are aspects of the image of God, the God Who is in Jesus Christ, that our lives should reflect and embody.

In around 70 AD the army of the future Emperor Titus surrounded Jerusalem. The city, with its Temple, was to be razed to the ground as a final punishment for a rebellion by the Jewish people against Roman rule. When the Romans stormed the Jerusalem Temple, we are told, they found the Holy of Holies empty, with no statues to worship. No gods, no images of gods were there. The God of the Jews, and now the God of the Christians, is not trapped within the stone and wood boxes that are Temples, or Churches.

The God we worship and follow cannot be contained anywhere, other than in the hearts and minds and bodies and souls of men and women like you and me.

There are those who believe this present age is increasingly atheist in culture. I am not so sure, when we see the gods of today being worshipped and venerated. But more than that, I see a hunger for the sacred that persists and even intensifies when knowledge is exploding.ⁱⁱⁱ

I meet people outside the Church, as well as inside, who are still questioning and wondering and asking those big questions about life, and what it means and how it should be lived, and why good things and bad things happen. I meet people outside the Church, as well as inside, who find themselves in need of comfort and kindness, welcome and inclusion, and invitation to find a place where they can draw breath, regroup, and consider those big questions, and, though they might not have the words, those questions about God and faith.

The gods of today do not ultimately satisfy those deep, spiritual needs. But we know the God Who does, the God Who is in Jesus Christ. We share that God, we follow that God today.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words*, p77ff. Used with the author's permission

ⁱⁱ Genesis 1:26

ⁱⁱⁱ Oakley, *ibid* p87