

SERMON: 2017/10/15 - BTR

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front. Put on some yellow Play-Doh "earrings."]

Last week we heard how the Hebrews and their leader Moses had camped at the foot of a tall mountain called "Horeb," which then exploded with fire and smoke. But it was God! Descending onto its summit in a blaze of Heavenly power; and He then spoke to them, telling them that it was His desire that they should obey 10 *special* rules or "commandments."

Then, things went a little quiet.

And so Moses decided to go up to the top to investigate, and to speak with God; and he climbed up so high that he disappeared in the clouds.

Now, after he was gone, the people became *very* bored and *very* fidgety: "Prfff! What shall we do? When's Moses gonna come back? There's nothing to do here." [Slouch and look tired.]

"I know!" Said someone. Let's ask Aaron, Moses' bother, to make us an "idol."

"A what?!"

"An idol: you know, a statue of a god made from precious metals and rare, sparkly stones."

And so they took off their jewellery - their earrings and necklaces and bracelets and belly-button piercings [remove Play-Doh jewellery] - and they made them into the shape of a golden calf - that's a young cow [re-shape the Play-Doh into a small figurine of a cow]; and they worshipped it and had had a big party to celebrate their new creation!

But do you know what?

Moses wasn't thrilled.

And neither was God.

In fact, they were very angry.

And Moses came running back down (into the camp) and he smashed that golden calf into *tiny* little bits [smash Play-Doh with palm] - so small, that he mixed it into a drink and made those naughty people drink it!

That seems like an extreme thing to do, but maybe there's an important lesson for us to learn.

Let's pray: Father God, help us to avoid making mistakes that anger you. Fill us with the Holy Spirit that we might become more obedient to our mums and dads, but especially you, in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Ask children to depart]

You should be asking yourself at least *two* questions about this episode.

Firstly, how could the Hebrews make such an *outrageous* request? And after all that they've seen! The fiery-cloudy pillar, the destruction of mighty pharaoh's forces, etc.

But there's a number of things to be borne in mind.

There's the fact that this incident takes place 40 days after Moses' disappearance: we have to turn back to chapter 24, verse 18 to find this little "nugget."

That's almost 6 weeks!

Six weeks without an e-mail or a text message.

And in very inhospitable circumstances:

3 times we're told that where they had made camp was a 'desert.' [Ex. 19:1-2]

And whilst one born in such a habitat might survive, Moses was an Egyptian princeling, remember, accustomed to living in a palace in the big city and to being waited on by servants.

The campsite was also in the shadow of what seems to have been a very active volcano. [Ex. 19:9,16,18]

And the region wasn't entirely empty: it was the "stomping ground" of the Amalekites - an aggressive tribe who were "spoiling for a fight" with these (nomadic) immigrants. [Ex. 17:8-16]

There was good reason, therefore, to suspect he might be dead.

And in his absence doubts would have arisen.

Questions will have been asked.

They had been in Egypt, remember, for 400 years. That's four centuries in which their attachment to the faith of Jacob and Joseph - let's call it "Yahwism" - likely became very, very tenuous, and many of them may have succumbed to the seductive culture of those who had enslaved them - a sort of "Stockholm Syndrome."

And they fall back on that: they regress to the *Egyptian* religion that had probably become, by this stage, their *own* tradition; and indeed, archaeologists tell us that '...calf and bull worship were ...widespread throughout the Middle East...' in this era [n.1], but especially there, in the cult of Hathor [n.2] - you can

see her depicted in your bulletin [Fig. 1].

But notice that though they may have *requested* a pagan idol, what Aaron builds them, *he* "proclaims," is, and I quote, 'to the Lord' [Ex. 32:5], which is very clever:

He takes an image that they were familiar with from their past lives, and attempts to *twist* its meaning in a more orthodox, pious direction, preventing a *complete* descent into full-blooded paganism.

Ultimately, then, thanks to his intervention, the Hebrews were prevented from *actually* worshipping something other than "Yahweh," the God of Abraham and their forefathers.

But if that's true, why did God become so angry?! And Moses too on the Lord's behalf? (And this is the second question.)

What *was* the big deal?

Because they chose to represent Him by a relic.

A throw-back.

They borrowed a form that belonged to a world of corruption, of exploitation, of lies and myths.

Rather than exercising themselves in a way that befitted the brand new start, with which they had been blessed: a brand new new start that demanded from them a *completely* different mentality *free* from any lingering vestiges of what had gone before. Unpolluted. Untainted.

What was being rejected was the convenient synthesis - a little bit of that, a little bit of this "and does it really matter anyway?"

Is it so bad to mix some falsehoods in with the truth?

Well, is it?

Yes! After all, we wouldn't accept our news this way: mostly accurate reporting but with a mix of fiction thrown in; some heavy-handed partisan editorialising, or a sprinkling of "spin-doctoring." "Give us just the facts!", we protest. Isn't that what Sargent Joe Friday used to say on Dragnet?

Last week I mentioned the Second Gulf War.

Well, I still remember pretty clearly the Tony Blair years.

And I was personally taken in by his charming, wonky smile and seeming candour, and specifically by the so-called "Dodgy Dossier" [n.3] with its blurry (satellite) images of what were supposed to be chemical-weapons facilities that the dictator, Saddam Hussein, was hiding in remote corners of Iraq - facilities that were never, in fact, discovered.

But we all knew that the Ba'athists - the ruling regime - was "nutty" and homicidal: they'd been fighting themselves to exhaustion against Iran and others, they'd definitely harboured various vicious terrorists over the years, and "lobbed" missiles at Israel [n.4]; and so, like others, I gave a silent "thumbs up" as the US and UK committed thousands of troops and billions of dollars to unleashing chaos in the Middle East.

And why?!

Because the case for it was a confusing combination of reality and deceit, and those things became entangled in the public's "mind;" and it was very hard to tease the threads apart.

For this reason, it is critical to isolate the good from the bad, the holy from the profane.

We mustn't settle for some sort of compromise. And we certainly mustn't *embrace* the compromise - although that will be our experience, of ourselves and others and this world. And I say this because much of the Church does do that - it looks on some behaviours and lifestyles, and says "Oh, that'll do. What's the harm? Leave it be."

But that isn't our calling! - not as "Christians."

In his letter to the *Hebrews*, Saint Paul says that we are to be 'strangers and foreigners on the earth'. That's chapter 11, verse 13. *Pilgrims*. On a journey. Like the men and women in *Exodus*.

But whilst what awaited them was wonderful: 'a broad [fertile] land, a land flowing with milk and honey' [Ex. 3:8], a place where they would become a numerous, self-governing people.

We're headed somewhere even better: the (*ultimate*) 'prize' [Phil. 3:14] - to a *new Canaan* for 'a wedding banquet for [the Son of Heaven]' [Mt. 22:1], a place of perfection. [see Mt. 5:48]

And so meaning well - having good intentions - isn't enough. Not to be a citizen of Christ's kingdom.

And this is why, in part, later, Aaron is excluded from entering the *first* Promised Land. [Nm. 20:22-29]

Yes, he was no idolater.

Despite what was asked of him by the other Hebrews, *he* didn't give in and worship some fake, non-existent deity; *not* when he had witnessed the miraculous "plagues" against Egypt, and had himself walked on dry-land across a sea-bed, seeing fish swimming on either side: *He was convinced by this* evidence of who God was, and He wasn't some impotent bovine-shaped folk-

tale.

He was so much more!

A passionate, caring, *powerful* keeper-of-promises.

Someone who made a very tangible difference in Aaron's day-to-day existence.

And yet Aaron responds to all that by giving God far less than He had asked for [see: specifically, the Second Commandment: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+20%3A4&version=NRSV>].

So, what are our "golden calfs?"

What do we cling to from our pre-Christian lives?

What do we excuse that Jesus wouldn't?

What compromises are we making every day that we should reject?

'Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.' [Phil. 4:8]

Amen.

Footnotes:

1. Sasson, Jack M. (1968), 'Bovine Symbolism in the Exodus Narrative', *Vetus Testamentum*, Volume 18, No. 1, pp. 380-387.
2. See: Sharpes, Donald K. (2006), *Sacred Bull, Holy Cow: A Cultural Study of Civilization's Most Important Animal*, New York, N. Y.: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., pp. 55-68.
3. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_Dossier
4. See, for example: Hitchens, Christopher (2003), *Regime Change*, London: Penguin Books.

Fig. 1:

