

No to idols! – a Sermon for 7th March, 2021, by Rev Phil Wootton

Exodus 20: 1-17 John 2: 13-22

Jesus cared about worship. He cared so much he came to the Temple like a wrecking ball. When he saw worship going wrong, turned into a system of money-making, power and exploitation, he attacked with a whip! He turned over the tables, and drove out the animals from the Temple courts. People sometimes say today, 'You didn't find Jesus in church,' but his disciples recognised he was 'consumed with zeal for the Lord's house'. Those who became his enemies knew these disruptive actions were not hooliganism, but prophetic judgment. They had the right questions, 'By what right do you do this? Are you from God?' Unfortunately, they didn't get the right answer, but one thing they did agree on: worship really matters.

God cares about worship. When God made his covenant promises, worship was always in the air. Noah worshiped on Mount Ararat, and God promised protection to humanity and all creation. Abraham worshipped near Hebron, and God promised to make him father of many nations. Moses worshipped on Mount Sinai, and God gave instructions about how to live as his people. Remember, when God had first called on Moses to speak to Pharaoh, it was to request freedom to go and worship in the desert. Now, when on Mount Sinai God reminds his people of his commitment to their freedom – 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' – worship tops his list of instructions. 'You shall have no other gods before me.' And a second, linked commandment follows quickly behind: 'You shall not make for yourself any idol in any form; you shall not bow down and worship it.' God cares about right worship – not so much about choices of times and venues and songs and rituals (which tend to be our concerns) but more fundamentally, God cares about the focus of worship: everything else flows from that.

I'm going to concentrate on this one Commandment today, mainly because the prohibition on idolatry seems, on the face of it, the least relevant to us of the Ten. Apart from 'pop idols' or 'sports idols' we don't really use the term very much. On the other hand, if you've ever been to an archaeological museum, you will know the ancient world was awash with carvings, statuettes, figurines of gold and silver, iron, bronze, copper; stone, wood or clay depicting a vast array of deities, major or minor, all of which once were worshipped. We may admire the craftsmanship. We may consider some be great works of art, or to tell a fascinating story of long-lost times. But it would never occur to us, in any shape or form, actually to worship any of these. When we hear stories of their destruction, whether in our own history at the Reformation, or in recent times with the actions of the Taliban or so-called Islamic State, we are appalled at such barbarism and cultural vandalism. Surely this can't be what God meant in giving the second Commandment to Moses?

And yet, the Old Testament is replete with condemnation of the evils of idolatry. Through the history books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, as well as in the prophets, idolatry is condemned even more than injustice and corruption. Psalm 115: 4-8 sets the scene: '*Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths but they cannot speak; eyes, but they cannot see. They have ears but cannot hear; noses, but they cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel; feet, but they cannot walk...*' But then the key point: '*Those who make them shall become like them, and so will all who trust in them.*'

Idols are inanimate objects. However, skilfully made, however good the materials used, they do not have life within them. If you worship as God that which is not God, you will take on its characteristics too. If you worship – give all your attention – to objects that are dead, then you will be as useless and lifeless as they are. Human beings bear the image of the living God. In worship we are called into the presence of the living God. The image of the living God is renewed in us. God's concern for right worship is not some divine vanity trip (as it can sometimes sound). God cares because it is what human beings are designed for. In worship, our vision grows for God and his world, and we grow into our full humanity.

So, have idols gone away? Absolutely not, we just give them different names. The god we hear about most in the Old Testament is Baal, a Canaanite fertility god. Worship Baal, the myth goes, your crops will yield a good harvest, your cows will give milk, and so on. All this is truly from the hand of Israel's God: but those who worshipped Baal were not simply getting God's name wrong, they were using rituals and sacrifices to try to get what they wanted – in the end, to make themselves rich. That fixation with wealth certainly has not gone away. It remains a very modern idol! The god called Aphrodite by the Greeks and Venus by the Romans represents erotic love, which is in itself is part of God's good creation, but is utterly destructive when it becomes obsession. Then Bacchus, god of drink and revelry: there's nothing wrong with celebrating human sociability, but longing for that next big night out can become a fixation. Much more subtly, the Romans had household gods called the *lares*, supposedly protectors of the home and all within. The desire to care for your family is obviously really good and natural, but this too can become obsessional, when translated either into needing an endlessly bigger property, or when love begins to stifle or control. Idolatry takes good things of God's creation, and worships them as if they were God. The consequences are destructive to the idol-worshipper and to those around them.

What about our church worship? After all, it was practices connected to religion that Jesus over-turned. We are called to worship God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength – so there shouldn't be anything half-hearted about it! But the danger is that the means become the ends, the good things that exist to help us worship actually become idols. Right now, perhaps the very things we miss most, whether it's the fellowship of gathering together, whether it's our familiar buildings, whether it's rituals or singing, or our own individual role or responsibility, or whether it's the practices involved with Holy Communion itself – each of these things can become an idol if they are our sole aim and focus: worship the Lord our God and serve him only.

Jesus cared about worship. He cared so much he turfed out those for whom the system of worship had got more important than worship itself. Jesus cared so much about true worship he allowed his body to be torn down and destroyed, so that it might be rebuilt (a new Temple) after three days, so that, through him, we might truly worship the Father.