

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)
11th September 2022

Moses has led his people out of captivity, out of slavery, and into freedom. Little by little they are becoming a nation. Now he has climbed the mountain, to be with God, and to receive from Him what is in a sense the constitution of their new nation, The Ten Commandments. The people are left behind at the foot of the mountain, watching the clouds and the smoke and the lightning up above them, wondering when Moses will return. The hours turn into days, and the days into weeks, and still Moses does not come back. 40 days have passed, and the people have become scared. They are scared that they have lost Moses, who led them to this place, and so they are scared that they may be left alone in the wilderness with nowhere to go, and only anger and slavery to go back to in Egypt. They are scared that they have lost, not just Moses, but God himself. It is a deeply frightening and unsettling time. And so the people do what we always tend to do when we are frightened or anxious: they act hastily, foolishly, in a panic; they regress, forgetting all that they have learned, and they default back to the way of the slave, making gods for themselves out of bright shiny metals. These gods are fake, of course, they do not really exist. As the psalmist will later say dismissively:

*"They have mouths, but they speak not,
they have eyes, but they see not,
they have ears, but they hear not,
nor is there any breath in their mouths."* Ps 135.16-17

At some level, of course, the people know this. They know that the great golden calf is a fake – how could a god that I have made myself be worth worshipping? But it gives them a sense that they are at least doing something, and they would rather have a fake god that they can see than the real one that they cannot see – it sounds mad, but there we are, that is what fear and panic does to you. It is no coincidence that the idol is a bright and shiny thing. As the people look at it they see – well, they see their own reflection. An idol, a fake god, conveniently just reflects you back. It shows you what you want to see, and tells you what you want to hear. There is no surprise there. So, it turns out, the idol is further proof of a basic reality of human existence. We are built to worship, built to worship God, and if we do not worship him we always end up, in some way, worshipping ourselves. This is what the people of Israel are doing, and this is why Moses has to break off his time with God and race back down the mountain, to rescue them from themselves.

We, of course, belong to a rational postmodern world, and the very idea of making idols to worship seems simply absurd. None of us would think of such a thing. Or would we. It is convenient for us to define idols as glittery statues, because then we can easily dismiss them as a relic of the past. But what if the idols we create for ourselves today are subtler, less obvious. What if we are bowing down to these idols without even realising it?

The Gospel always invites us to look with honesty at the question, what are your deepest needs, your deepest desires? Then the Gospel helps us see that all of these needs and desires, insofar as they are life-giving and human, are met in the story of Jesus Christ. But if we miss this, then idols

will wheedle their way in, standing between us and the Good News, and we will bow to them instead. They will stand between us and the life-giving love of Christ, and persuade us to settle for something less than the best.

We all want to be loved, of course; we all want to know that someone, at least, finds us loveable. If we are wise we will listen to the stories of the Gospel and see how easy Jesus finds it to love even the most unlikely people, and we will see him giving himself to us at Mass, and we will know that he will love us. But if we are foolish we may panic, frightened of being unloved, and create an image of ourselves to project to the world around us that will be bright and shiny and, we think, irresistible; but it will be a fake, an idol.

We all want to be happy, too. There is nothing wrong in that, we know that happiness – indeed, much more than happiness, joy, bliss, are what we hope for in Heaven. So if we are wise we set about becoming more and more the sort of people who are fit for Heaven, and in doing so we become more and more fit for happiness, which turns out to come to us a by-product of living well. If we are foolish, of course, we think the opposite, we think that living well is an obstacle to happiness, rather than the pathway to it, and we bow down to the idol of pleasure-seeking, not recognising that even as we dance with this idol it is slipping chains around us to bind us.

The longing for security can be derailed by the idol of living in a past that no longer exists; the longing to make a difference, to do good things even great things, can become the idol of an angry and selfish tyranny that will not listen to people who see a different sort of world. Technology can become an idol that traps us rather than frees us; so can the pursuit of prosperity, or even one of the most tricky idols of all, the idol that is the pursuit of what we had planned, even when circumstances change and wisdom suggests we change our plans, because we cannot bring ourselves to change course.

What are our deepest desires and needs? The wise person knows that in some way or another, all these are met in Jesus Christ. But all of us, from time to time, are tricked by the shiny idols. They need to be ground against the cross and dispersed as once the golden calf was, so they can no longer imprison us.

I cannot end without some words about the late Queen. So much has been said already, including some few words by me, but it does seem right to reflect on how her life meshes with this scripture story. The greater the power that any person has the greater the temptation, and above all the greater the temptation to believe that all the pomp and the pageantry is because of your own virtue and cleverness – to become, in effect, an idol yourself. It is very clear that the Queen had looked these idols in the face and brushed them aside. She saw herself as a servant in a crown, and all the pageantry was directed not to making her feel important, but to opening the doors for a servant in a crown. In the end, of course, even kings and queens must leave the crown behind, and as we have seen in these last few days the baton must pass from one generation to the next in a procession that none of us can stop. So the servant in a crown becomes instead just a servant, and that is greatly to her benefit because when it comes to admission to the Kingdom of Heaven, only servants need apply.