

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

Morning service 15 October 2017

Being fully human

Readings:

Ex. 32: 1-14

Phil. 4: 1-9

Luke 12: 22-31

The Golden Calf is such a well-known image that it usually doesn't need explaining. In our day, worshipping the golden calf generally means being a slave to riches and believing that wealth will bring meaning and happiness. Which, as Laura Scott recently reminded us, is a futile assumption. Let's take a closer look at this story in the book of Exodus to see what it might reveal for our own journeys.

The story itself is very old, though the text we read may not be that old by Old Testament standards – probably written down a few hundred years BC, relating something that we are told happened at the time of the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness. The surrounding peoples worshipped gods that were thought to have entered figures made by human hands, making the figures themselves god-like. So there was a great danger that the Israelites may have believed that their God was actually present in the golden calf – and from there it was a short step to worshipping the figure itself and believing it had god-like powers.

In v. 4 of the text we read, it says of Aaron:

He took the gold from them, formed it into a mould and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'

By the way, if you are wondering about the use of singular and plural in the one text ('These are your gods ...'), take a look at 1 Kings 12:28ff one day, in which two golden calves are made, albeit in a different context. That text uses exactly the same words as I just quoted from Exodus 32:4. The plural makes sense in 1 Kings 12 because there were two golden calves – but not in Exodus, where there's only one. But whatever the reason for this puzzling connection between these two texts, the account of the golden calf that we read today is thoroughly in keeping with the commandment cited in Exodus 20 forbidding the Israelites from shaping any gods from silver or gold. The deep truth of the golden calf account in Exodus 32, namely the life-and-death question of who God's people trust and worship, and the consequences of placing faith in gods of our own making, belongs squarely within the Exodus account. And in our contemporary context.

The Israelites, camped somewhere in an inhospitable place they could not call their own, not knowing where to go from there and desperately clinging to any leadership they had, felt lost and abandoned when Moses failed to return from the mountain. He had gone there to listen and talk to God. Many people must have assumed Moses was dead. They lost their trust in the God who had led them safely out of Egypt.

Mistakenly, the Israelites projected all sorts of expectations onto the object they created, giving it a power over them that it did not, of itself, possess. At last, they might have thought, this enigmatic, invisible God who led us out of Egypt with various powerful signs and wonders but never revealed the divine face, is within our grasp. But God cannot be manipulated, encapsulated. So as the lump of precious metal in front of them began to glow with all their illusions and delusions, *it* began to manipulate *them* – to shape their expectations and their behaviour – because they assigned to it a power that it did not possess.

The people threw a wild party to celebrate their new god. Maybe there was an element of frenetic obsession in it all. Maybe they felt a new freedom without Moses at the helm and with a god they felt was manageable. Whatever the reason, the people abandoned the ordered relationships and behaviour they had practised to that point and began to party without restraint. The ordered creation of the people of God was descending into chaos.

At this point I'd like to show you two contemporary visual references to the Golden Calf that relate to our context, albeit in very different ways.

SLIDE 1: DAMIEN HIRST – THE GOLDEN CALF



In 2008 the controversial, famous and no doubt wealthy British artist Damien Hirst auctioned this work entitled 'The Golden Calf'. It's a sculpture over two metres high, consisting of a bull calf in formaldehyde, its head topped by a solid gold disk, standing on a marble plinth in a glass case with a gold-plated frame. The bull's horns and hooves are of 18-carat gold.

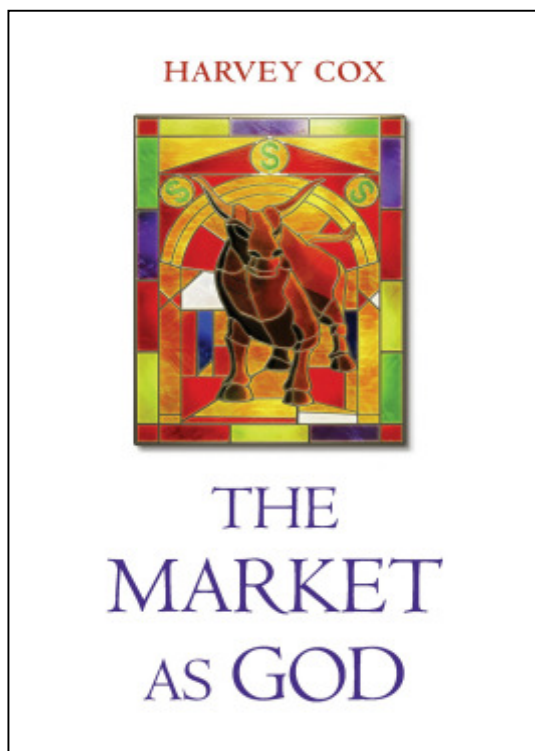
Shortly before the auction the sculpture was tipped to bring in up to 12 million pounds. I don't know how much it actually sold for. The viewer could read it in various ways: as social comment, an ironic reference to the high-flying art market or simply a tongue-in-cheek way of earning the artist a tidy sum. It's a confronting

work. It alludes to the story we read today. In ancient Egypt one of the religious cults involved the worship of the god Apis in the form of a bull. A golden disc between its horns symbolised Apis's mother Hathor. So in a way, this sculpture could shed light on the Exodus account by demonstrating visually how dangerous it was for the Israelites to create a golden calf, because this graven image lessened the distinction between the Israelites' God and the gods of the Egyptians they had fled from.

What makes this sculpture confronting is the calf itself. Seeing it frozen in time and formaldehyde, we can't escape the recognition that this was once a living, breathing, warm-blooded creature. The commodification of the calf has been its death. At the same time, turning the calf into an object of great price by adding the gold, even turning some parts of the animal into gold, has made it into some kind of god, an object to be worshipped. The concept of 'adding value' has never been so vividly depicted.

And that brings us to the second visual reference to the golden calf:

SLIDE 2: HARVEY COX, 'THE MARKET AS GOD'



In 2016, emeritus professor of Protestant theology in the US, Harvey Cox, published this book, in which he argues that the market economy has become 'God' in our world. I have not read the book but have read an early essay on which it was based, and reviews of the book. Cox identifies many characteristics of the market economy that are similar to Christianity – note the golden calf in the stained glass window. Cox writes that the advertising world knows how to use 'narratives' – parables, liturgies, and testimonies – just like traditional religions do. One book reviewer who quotes this goes on to say: 'And like an omnipotent God, the Market knows our needs and desires via focus groups and big data' (Melissa Jones). Cox is implying

that the economic system created in the West, and now spreading to most countries of the world, has been allowed to amass such all-encompassing powers that it is god-like and is now manipulating us. A monetary value is attached to even the most intrinsic parts of us such as our individual interests, values and desires. Recall the golden horns and hooves of Damien Hirst's calf.

Harvey Cox argues that the more power we ascribe to the free market, the more Creation is turned into commodities, things we can sell. Are we giving the market a power that it should not possess? Language is again telling: natural resources such as iron ore, oil, gold and silver, but also wheat and corn, are termed commodities and traded globally. Cox argues that in our globalised free market system,

[t]hings that have been held sacred transmute into interchangeable items for sale. Land is a good example. For millennia it has held various meanings. ... It has been Mother Earth, ancestral resting place, holy mountain, enchanted forest, tribal homeland, aesthetic inspiration, sacred turf, and much more.

I've just returned from the Pacific, where landgrabbing by multinational companies for mining and logging is a huge issue for people whose families have lived on the land for centuries. In Australia we could think of the meanings attached to land by Aboriginal people. According to Cox, land has been reduced to just one thing: real estate. This, he says, robs the land of its sacredness and 'dramatically alters the human relationship to land; the same happens with water, air, space, and soon (it is predicted) the heavenly bodies'. I listened to a radio program on the ABC recently in which the speaker, an expert in the field, talked about research being undertaken to explore the possibility of mining on the moon.

In the globalised world we all live in, and living in a Western urban setting as we do, we're all part of the prevailing structures, and we could not escape them if we wanted to. And the market economy has brought us and our country many benefits. But the story of the golden calf urges us to critique the structures we are part of so that we do not unthinkingly exploit other people and other creatures, and so that we do not allow ourselves to be dehumanised. We allow ourselves to be dehumanised when we worship gods of our own making, just as the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, because it means we are turning away from the One who created us and made us fully human. What sort of gods might these be? Money is the obvious one. We could add to it anything we hinge our identity on: an ideology, status, getting ahead in the workplace, a particular cause that we pursue. Allowing these things to manipulate our desires, thoughts and actions, and our relationships, means we dehumanise ourselves and others.

The story of the journey of God with the people of God doesn't begin just with the Exodus. It begins with Creation. In Genesis and Exodus there is one continual theme: the creation of life through the ordering of chaos, first of all in the whole of creation and then in the creation of God's people. As we've seen, that good order started to unravel when the Israelites began to worship a god of their own making, and they were almost destroyed as a result. Yet God's journey with the people of God is

ongoing. The story of the Exodus teaches us that God creates a future for us, and that hope is based on past experience of God's creating, recreating and providing for us.

We believe that the coming of Jesus into this world was the destination of that journey, and that a new journey began after the resurrection. God became visible in the world not in a graven image of our making but in a human being like us, the embodiment of God's love for the world: born of the Spirit, born of a woman. There could be no more poignant expression of God's commitment to humanity than this. In his life Jesus strove to heal and bring about just relations, announcing the presence of God's reign or 'kingdom'. He gave his life for this kingdom, relinquishing his freedom and power, and gave it to us to carry on the journey. We walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and we are part of the life-giving order that is God's reign in this world. If that is what we believe, and if we believe that the whole world, and not just the church, not even just humanity as a whole, is God's good creation, then we journey with God in upholding what is life-giving in the whole of the world around us. That extends to our concern for the natural world, but it also means upholding what is life-giving in our relationships, our communities, and in ourselves.

Sometimes it is not so easy to uphold what is life-giving when we are caught up in structures that are based on consumption and monetary gain. But perhaps our gratitude for the beautiful created world and for the gift of God's love might help us to reflect on our choices of what we buy, how much we accumulate, how much we waste, and what we spend our time on, seeking to find what is most life-giving and life-affirming, in these circumstances. It's something I struggle with every day. I am encouraged whenever I hear how at Prince of Peace school and college students are made aware of all these issues and encouraged to live responsibly.

Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Philippi, in the passage we read this morning, speaks of what would be life-giving for that community. Division had crept into that community in the form of a disagreement between two of the community's leaders, diverting their gaze from their ministry in the world around them, and Paul exhorts the community to settle these differences not by being judgmental and condemning the women but by 'helping' them. That could mean listening, mediating, understanding, grieving with them, helping them to understand why they feel the way they do and find some possible ways out of the impasse. To listen with humility, we may well have to give up some of the 'gods' we cling to.

Let's close by hearing the words of Paul again, in v. 6-8 of Philippians Ch. 4:

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God's

peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

⁸ And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Amen.

Glenine Hamlyn