

## THE GOLDEN CALF AND TODAY'S FINANCIAL CRISIS

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, Sub-Dean of General Seminary,  
in St. John's Episcopal Church, Beverly Farms, Massachusetts,  
on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, 12 October 2008  
Year A, Proper 23, Revised Common Lectionary:  
Ex. 32.1-14; Ps. 106.1-23; Phil. 4.1-9; Matt. 22.1-14

*In the name of God who gave birth to the Word,  
God the Word made flesh,  
and God the Spirit who empowers the Word for life. Amen.*

**"Aaron took the gold from the people, formed it in a mold,  
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!"**

### **Deity and its representation,**

#### **devotion and idolatry –**

these are raised as issues as we hear the story of the Golden Calf in the wilderness  
and as we in our own time wrestle with deity and its representation,  
and with devotion and idolatry in our own lives,  
and all this with a special twist in these days of financial instability and turmoil.

### **Representations of deity – how we picture the divine in graphic art and sculpture –**

#### **The human community certainly has a complex set of attitudes about this!**

Look at this very sanctuary! – you're surrounded by images in your stained-glass  
windows:

maybe 30 or 40 figures from the Bible and Christian history  
and then at the east end a triumphant figure of Jesus the word of God become  
flesh.

In quite a few other churches there are even images purporting to show God the first  
person of the Trinity,

just as Michelangelo did not hesitate to depict God as an aging but vigorous man  
in his fresco of the creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

You treasure these windows for their beauty,

and doubtless over the years you've meditated on some of the depictions,  
but you'd probably disagree with any implication that you *worship* the images that  
appear in the windows.

You have a cross suspended above the altar here –

if this were a different kind of Episcopal church that cross might be a crucifix,  
showing the crucified Christ suffering there –

and some of you bow as you pass before the cross, or as the cross passes you in  
the procession,

and some of you don't – and wonder why those who do do as they do!

In recent years, some of you may have begun to use icons in your personal devotion,

especially now that icons are prominent in the parish's meditation chapel,  
 a practice rare in the Episcopal Church in, say, 1950.  
 And perhaps you've been aware that 1,300 years ago in Byzantine Christianity people  
 were killing each other over the question whether icons were idols,  
 and so there developed the distinction between *worship* of icons, considered  
 idolatrous, and the *veneration* of icons, which is the heart of the practice.  
 Visual depictions in worship spaces were a major issue in the Protestant Reformation:  
 I recall the somber sight of John Calvin's sanctuary in Geneva:  
 a church of cathedral-like proportions, the windows now only clear glass and all  
 the niches emptied of the religious statues that used to fill them.

I grew up with religious images in the Hinduism of India:  
 millions of statues of hundreds and thousands of deities both major and minor –  
 Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesh and Kali, of course, but so many others,  
 like Hanuman, the monkey god, whose footprint I was shown from where he had  
 leaped over the Marble Rocks of the mighty Nerbada River in Jabalpur  
 where we lived.  
 Were people worshipping the images, or did the images serve simply to direct their  
 attention to the divine presence they did worship? –  
 that was always an open question for me,  
 as it also was for my missionary parents, whose lives were devoted to the study of  
 popular religion in India  
 By contrast, where I served in Zimbabwe, African Traditional Religion has purveys no  
 images of either the single High God or the multiple ancestral spirits.

Muslims perceive images as so prone to inspire worship that any religious depictions are  
 forbidden –  
 and so throughout the world the Muslim artistic gift in worship is devoted to the  
 architecture of the mosque,  
 the crafting of details like marble inlay floral designs,  
 and, gloriously, the calligraphing of Arabic text.  
 Muslim hostility to religious imagery has taken extreme form,  
 as in the Taliban's destruction in 2001 of the great 6th-century statues of the  
 Buddha in the Bamiyan valley of Afghanistan,  
 and the global upheaval over the cartoons of Muhammed that appeared in a  
 Danish newspaper in 2005.

*We see longing, anxiety, passion, hostility and violence in people's attitudes toward  
 religious images –*  
 something like **the longing, anxiety, passion, hostility and violence we see in  
 the story of the Golden Calf in the desert.**  
 The Hebrews thought they'd waited long enough for the end of Moses' retreat or séance  
 or whatever was going on up the mountain –  
 in fact, it was not an unreasonable assumption that he'd perished of hunger, been  
 attacked by animals, or been killed in the volcanic eruption – or whatever  
 all that smoke and fire were!

However understandable their anxiety was, though, the story is told from the standpoint that what they did with their anxiety was the essence of unfaithfulness. As Psalm 106 puts it, "They forgot God their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt."

They not only forgot what Yahweh had done, they turned away and replaced Yahweh with another god, one they could see and touch.

**That's the heart of the matter – the turning away and replacing –**

they had known Yahweh, but they turned away and replaced Yahweh with another.

Judaism has always been hostile to any religious depictions, but subtle issues of the role of icons, statues and stained-glass windows were not central to what happened at the base of Mt. Sinai— instead, it was the fundamental question, *Who is your God? and, Whose God are you?*

**What drove the Hebrews to that infidelity?**

**It was insecurity intensifying into panic.**

They'd been delivered from slavery, but they needed leadership.

They thought they had a leader in Moses, but he'd disappeared on them.

They thought they had a god in Yahweh, but Moses was the mediator, and now with Moses absent they'd lost a sense of Yahweh present.

Yet they were religious people – you have to hand them that! – and they couldn't go on without some sign of the divine in their lives.

And so they got to Aaron, the not very good substitute leader:

"Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us" – that is to say, gods who would prepare the way, gods who would protect and nurture them, gods to whom they could entrust their future, a future that seemed dim, unknown and frightening.

**Who is your god? Whose god are you?**

These questions posed around the Golden Calf are posed to us as well:

Who is your god? Whose god are you?

Who or what is central in shaping the questions and the outcomes of our lives?

Who or what is the foundational reference point for us?

We're here in church today because our answer is that the foundation for us is the Triune God revealed in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the incarnation of God in the human story.

And yet, and yet, don't we struggle for that to be so?

Don't we struggle with a tendency to push God aside and let other concerns rule?

When we're angry – really, really annoyed with someone –

don't we allow other concerns like our prerogatives and our hurt to be central?

And when we're insecure and anxious – much as the Hebrews were in the desert – it can be easy for us to obsess about what worries us

and push aside as irrelevant and powerless the God who is the source of our  
 identity,  
 the God who nurtures and sustains us,  
 God the horizon of our future,  
 God the very ground of our being.

**The past few weeks have been a time of such anxiety for all of us –**

worry bordering on panic that shows no sign of abating in the immediate future,  
 anxiety for all in our nation and for all in the world community  
 as the financial turmoil affects the local and the global alike –  
 and in the midst of it we're deciding on future leadership in a historic presidential  
 campaign.

The concerns are real and important, for at stake are the resources people need to live  
 incarnate lives of responsible stewardship in the world –  
 life savings for one's family, the value of one's house, retirement provisions and,  
 for more and more people every month, the very possibility of gainful  
 employment.

Certainly, Golden Calf worship by some in the halls of high finance is responsible for this  
 crisis coming on as it has,  
 but making what provision one can to safeguard the necessities of life is *not*  
 worshiping a Golden Calf –  
 though we need to be responsible about what we include among true necessities.

*Obsessing* about our worries,  
 allowing them to take us over,  
 allowing our worries in this crisis to warp our ethics as we claw our way to some  
 imagined top of the heap in the midst of catastrophe –  
*that is* worshiping the Golden Calf.

In today's *New York Times* an investor describes how he got taken over by the recent  
 market gyrations:

"One day, he checked the market on his Treo cellphone about 200 times.  
 'I thought to myself, "What am I doing?"' he said.  
 'I had to stop because I was driving myself crazy.'"<sup>1</sup>

Obsession pushes God aside and replaces God with the object of our desire and  
 obsession.

Panicking about money in this crisis forgets the history of what God has done in our lives  
 and the hope of what God may yet do in our lives.

**To us the obsessing ones God comes as the inviting one.**

"Come to me," invites Jesus the presence of God in flesh,  
 "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden.  
 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,  
 for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

In Jesus' parable today God is pictured as the one who invites all to a wedding feast –

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<sup>1</sup> Laura M. Holson, "Across the Country, Fear about Savings, the Job Market and Retirement," *New York Times*, 12 October 2008.

yes, a lot of invitees had other things to do and couldn't be bothered,  
 but the invitation stood – and it still stands.  
 It's not a matter of God *instead* of the real world –  
 no, God loved the real world so much that God became one of us *in it*,  
 and many of Jesus' stories and teachings had everything to do with money and its  
 stewardship.  
 Central rather is God's invitation *in the midst* of the real,  
 Christ's presence *in the midst* of the daily,  
 the Holy Spirit's working *in the midst* of the busy working of the human  
 community.  
 So we are not called to disengage, as though today's pressing realities were not important,  
 but rather to engage not only the crisis but God as well:  
 let God travel with us *through* travail,  
 turn to God *in the midst* of crisis,  
 be whole and integrated as we seek to respond with both prudence and  
 compassion,  
 caring for the other as well as for ourselves.  
 In this morning's classic collect we pray that God's grace may always precede and follow  
 us –  
 in fact, God's grace *is* preceding and following us,  
 and our prayer should be that we be *aware* of such grace:  
 preceding us as invitation,  
 following us as support.

**In the turmoil of these weeks I suggest that we cannot do better than to take deeply  
 to heart the counsel we have heard today from the apostle Paul  
 writing to the small Christian community at Philippi.**

And by taking deeply to heart I do *not* mean obeying,  
 but rather *contemplating* Paul's words,  
 taking them into our prayer life,  
 and letting them function for us as a catalyst for centering in the divine presence  
 that is no Golden Calf but the gracious gift of God in our lives and in the  
 life of the universe:  
 "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.  
 Let your gentleness be known to everyone.  
 The Lord is near.  
 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with  
 thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.  
 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your  
 minds in Christ Jesus.  
 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, 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."

*And now to God who sits upon the throne and to Christ the Lamb  
be worship and praise, dominion and splendor  
forever and forever more. Amen.*