

Adult sermon notes

Exodus 32:1-20

The background to this passage is found in Exodus 24:15-18 and in the chapters that follow. After a period of waiting and preparation Moses meets God on Mount Sinai to receive the law and the commandments on tablets of stone. Aaron and the leaders of Israel are told to wait while Moses goes up Sinai – but he is gone a long time. The people begin to complain to Aaron and a shameful episode in Israel's history begins.

Who is at the centre?

On the mountain God had instructed Moses to invite the people *'whose hearts prompt them to give'* to make offerings to create the 'tabernacle', the portable sanctuary or tent of meeting which was to be God's dwelling place among his people (Exodus 25:1). The offerings of the people would construct this special meeting place which would declare the presence of God with his people

Instead they create a golden calf out of the gifts they were given as they left Egypt and place this calf on the altar. Instead of giving gifts to God to declare his presence at the heart of the community, they turn gifts they were given by God into something they worship instead of God. The gold from Egypt was a sign of blessing and freedom. What had been a blessing now becomes an idol. The problem as St Paul teaches lies not with money but the love of money. The love of money and the power that it brings is a result of putting ourselves at the centre of our own universe. A useful illustration is the story of Nicholas Copernicus. He challenged the accepted teaching of the church that the earth was at the centre of the universe. The planets orbit around the life giving sun. We need a Copernican revolution in our money thinking. It is not we who are at the centre of our own universe but that love and light of God which is truly life giving.

The seduction of money

Many of the Israelites, including Aaron, were confused about what was happening. Aaron placed the calf-god on the altar and then proclaimed a festival to the Lord. The problem with money is that it is very seductive; it is never altogether clear when it is a blessing and when it is becoming an idol. Putting money at the centre is rarely something we set out to do. It happens unnoticed until suddenly there it is right at the heart of our lives. It needs careful discernment, good teaching and a focus on God to avoid this trap. Here is one of the difficult issues. When Israel put something other than God at the centre of their

Preach Exodus!

Week Four Where your heart is...

Adult Sermon Notes

community life it was 'dressed up' as worship. It had a religious flavour. Often we can defend our accumulation of possessions as virtuous: caring and providing for our family, education for our children, a good lifestyle for those we love. There is of course nothing wrong in these things in and of themselves. But it requires careful discernment as to what lies at the centre. The problem with money, as with idols, is that they are seductive.

Peer pressure

How did this happen? The people of Israel had learned to trust in God's provision of manna and water on their long desert journey. Now they have to learn something new: how to trust when both God and the signs of his provision appear to be *absent*. Unwilling to wait, the people pressure Aaron into providing new symbols of leadership, purpose and direction. How often does 'peer pressure' lead us towards disobedience? We cannot evade the responsibility for own actions but nor can we avoid the pressure of modern society to want and have more. The acid test of discipleship is the willingness to trust when God seems distant – or absent. If God is not our focus, something else will take his place.

Repentance (33:1-6)

The conclusion of the story is given in Exodus 33. God tells Moses and the people to leave the place and journey to the Promised Land, a place 'flowing with milk and honey'. God promises he will drive out the inhabitants. But because of their disobedience, he will not accompany them on their journey. They will receive the fruits of his promise - but not the presence. It is perhaps a picture of where many Christians in the West can find ourselves. Do we want a faith that makes us secure in the lifestyle we have or one that seeks first the presence of God.

The response of the people of Israel is clear. They remove their jewellery and ornaments as a symbol of their repentance. They do not destroy them but removing them is a symbol of a new way of thinking, a new place for the heart. Sometimes we have to acknowledge that possessions and the desire to possess have occupied the centre of our lives. We also need to repent, to recognise that we may have a heart problem. There may be something else competing for centre stage on the altar of our lives. Gifts and possessions are a blessing but can be a burden. Recognition and repentance are sometimes necessary to restore the balance. Next week we explore another aspect of how to do this.

Page 41