

*Sermon reflections*

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## Trapped



### Reflection Questions

1. How do motives drive my actions, and what feeds them?
2. 'Values issue in generous or impoverished actions.' To what extent do you agree with this?
3. What might a bigger and better vision of using available resources have led Pharaoh to do?

'Compare and contrast' has been the opener for many an exam question and blighted the happiness of many a poor student! But it's a question begged today by our passage. Compare and contrast the actions of oppression with potential that could have blessed a nation.

Our story picks up the shift in Israel's early life into Egypt but a generation on from the pioneers such as Abraham. And the time lapse sees a new power who knows nothing of Joseph's generosity and service. Instead he sees threat and danger and draws deeply from a well of insecurity to structure and institutionalise the oppression of another nation.

Fear usually produces bad results when we allow it to feed our decisions and there are plots and plans aplenty here that illustrate this point.

Look at

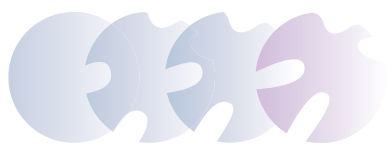
- Verse 9 – the embryo of fear;
- Verse 10 – the plotting, and finally;
- Verses 11-14 – the effective plans being progressed to ensure repression and slavery.

Of course, the psychology is simple: restrict movement, economy, choices and standards of living and you have a dis-empowered, weakened and demoralised people. Easy to deal with, easy to control and easy to dominate. Slavery has always been a wicked way to control others so those with power benefit.

Imagine a different regime where power is employed to make shared and just livelihoods, where relationships are built on trust and output allows a generation to build something for children and children's children. That's what the kingdom of God is meant to look like. Yet the poverty imposed on the Israelites reveals a poverty of soul in the Egyptians that reduces everyone. ■

Archbishop Andy John was ordained priest in 1990, serving in the diocese of St David's before being elected as Bishop of Bangor in 2008. A fluent Welsh speaker, Archbishop Andy is passionate about stewardship and church growth and as Bishop of Bangor continues to advise on drug and alcohol related issues.

## Walking free



### Reflection Questions

1. Read Matt. 21:28f. Can you think of any differences between this parable and the actions of Pharaoh?
2. The generosity of the Egyptians brings unexpected blessing. Whom might you be able to bless unexpectedly and what will this require from you?
3. Does this text have anything to say about perceiving the work of God in small things and small acts?

**T**he promise of freedom sounds enticing and problem free even if challenging for Moses. But the reality is that it was hard won, and freedom usually is a good deal more demanding than we think.

Our passage offers different perspectives on the capacity of people to be generous and what this says about their own 'soul state'. For Pharaoh, the liberty he gives is all but wrenched from him, reluctantly and because of self-interest. His despair issues in a plea: 'Go, worship the Lord ... and bless me' (12:31-32). Sometimes actions are not enough because what drives them is utterly at odds with gospel values. It is difficult to see Pharaoh's actions as generous at all, even if they bring Israel's freedom.

Our text opens another narrative, however, more communal and local, in which the generous sharing of life and living now delivers better, holier generosity. The Egyptians come good and articles for the journey are given. This has the stamp of God on it (12:36) but is the fruit of a kind of relationship built over time in which generosity and kindness now allow a crisis to be processed and survived without further casualty.

This steady investment has a great deal to say about the way Christian relationships should be built – but not so that the day of crisis allows us to draw on previous favours but because a sure and deliberate kindness is in itself an act of godly kindness. This is distinctly Christlike. ■



## All we need



### Reflection Questions

1. What words characterise the money culture in our church: scarcity, anxiety, defensiveness, abundance, gift, trust?
2. What are the risks if our church hoards or protects what we have?
3. How can our church put into practice the themes of trust knowing that God is the Giver of all we have?

The word 'disciple' carries a number of meanings but behind them all lies the idea of one who learns. Here we learn both from a disciple's lack of trust and from God's abundant provision.

For Israel the physical wilderness through which they travelled was also a wilderness of heart and soul. Captivity in Egypt had crushed their spirits (Exodus 6:9): low expectations, brittle faith, unaware they are a people of promise. Scarcity of water (15:22ff) and food fuel a spirit of grumbling that reached beyond their flaky confidence in Moses' leadership (16:9).

Tough times are often the proving ground of faith. Here, grumbling encounters glory; scarcity meets abundance. 'In the morning', says Moses, 'you shall see the glory of the Lord' (16:7); they wake to find bread for the hungry. Those necessary material things in life can be the root of our anxiety or the vehicle of God's promise and provision (Matt. 6:25-34). Our discipleship around money and possessions is formative of the spirituality of individuals and congregations.

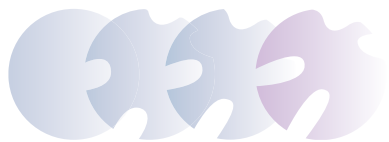
This abundant gift of manna (from *manhue*, 'what is it?') reveals the heart of the Giver and the obligations of discipleship. Manna cannot be stored by the greedy, the opportunist or the anxious but feeds the poor, the sick, old and young. Israel learned to trust God's provision in desert scarcity and had to learn trust afresh in an affluent land (Deut. 8:1-14).

So we need to think, feel and live differently around wealth. God's gifts entrusted to us cannot be hoarded, controlled or possessed. They are given to meet needs, to share generously, to be enjoyed in community. And at the heart of the story is Sabbath, reminding us that God is the true giver of all we have and that life is about being more, not just having more. This is a twin and radical challenge to an affluent west.

Paul quotes this story of God's glory, abundance and gift when he challenged Corinth to 'excel in the grace of giving' (2 Cor. 8:7; cf v2 and v8). Generosity starts not with our giving but with knowing that all we have is a gift from God. Discipleship around money is not just about what we give but how we live with all that God has entrusted to us. ■



## What comes first?



### Reflection Questions

1. What are the pinch points in your life that might make you look for 'other gods'?
2. What is the reason we value things sometimes more than God, and how can we avoid this?
3. How would you retell this story in ways more accessible to people today?

There are few passages in the Old Testament more alarming than this. As a narrative critique of human behaviour, it is devastating in its realism and brutal truth. Our passage today does two things: it provides the character of challenge all people face, Christian or otherwise, and also the relative value we place on things as opposed to Almighty God.

And the opening words indicate where the story is going. It's going badly. The crowd tires of waiting for Moses and heads for the second-in-command, Aaron. And the people want totems, symbols and figures to do the business, 'to go before us'. As they see it, any good deeds thus far were all tied up with Moses and, in his absence, they need guarantees of future progress. In an act of sheer madness, Aaron gives way and the gold becomes a thing to be worshipped not worn.

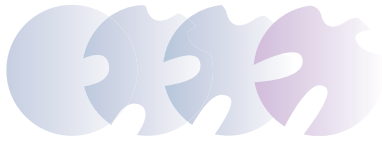
How should we read these verses? The temptation, in the waiting for God, is often to press on regardless. Human nature struggles with silence and the absence of an immediate God. The rush for answers can lead us to look elsewhere for what will satisfy or substitute. We like guarantees of future progress. In the language of Exodus, gods who will 'go before us'.

And if the inclination is real, its 'satisfaction' is powerful if only for a season. The gold is fashioned and out pops the calf, almost by accident, the story later records. The substitution of God by things made sits at the heart of human sin and the scriptural records. We overvalue the created and displace the Creator.

These are territories we constantly inhabit as Christians, as do others, and our choices, formed and shaped by many influences, are ground-breaking. Happy are those who know their God and worship only him. ■



## Presence and gifts



### Reflection Questions

1. How do we develop healthy attitudes to created things?
2. What deepens and challenges your own worship of God and what are the choices we make that assist or hinder this?
3. Are there now things you would like to do to respond to this story?

If the matter of values controlled a good deal of what we saw in the previous passage, this is underlined in this passage but in a more positive manner. Our two passages connect the worth of worshipping God (40:34-38) and the expression of that worship in devotion (35:1-10). These two values are without parallel in the Christian life.

The supreme importance of worship lay at the heart of Israel's experience. It is, of course, the most weighty of all the commandments (Exodus 20:1-4). And the ongoing attention to worship isn't to be taken for granted – how easily in our own lives does the glory appear to depart? Part of the reason for this I think lies in the previous chapter, where the real cost and devotion of time and gift shows the mettle of the Israelites' faith. The list is long (Exod. 35:5-9) and expensive! And the skills are no less valuable (v.10) so that we think only the well off have something deep and worthy to offer. In fact gifts are brought for the building of the Tent of Meeting by all the people of God. Each of them has been blessed and called from Egypt and each has an investment in the worship of the people of God. We cannot miss the sense of shared job and purpose as the people bring their gifts.



This perspective on human actions and human values is often missing today. The 'planet me' syndrome leads to a life in which the accumulation of wealth rather than its appropriate use drives ambition and appetite. But such thinking is deceiving and holds us in a world where God and people have less value and where the marks of success are man-made and usually gold coloured.

The joy and dignity and value of giving our time, our talents and our wealth and possessions are all natural consequences to this story. Lives rich in such acts convey blessing to God, to the church and to the world. ■