

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 11TH OCTOBER 2020

No 30

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 **Being ready for worship**

Today we look at the incident of the golden calf from Exodus. It reminds us all of how easily we shunt God out of central place in our lives, and transfer our devotion to a god which is more convenient, more accommodating of our particular preferences and generally less demanding. So, as you begin, I encourage you to reflect on your own priorities, and make a deliberate effort to move them from central place in your mind, so that you are free to come into the presence of God. When you are ready, begin with these prayers.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) was, despite his Swedish name inherited from his Swedish father, an English composer born in Gloucestershire. He studied at the Royal College of Music in London, and became a music teacher. His two most important posts, which he held until his death, were at St Paul's Girls' School and Morley College. However, he is better remembered as an innovative composer, who revived earlier English musical traditions, but combined these with a wide variety of contemporary traditions. He wrote operas, symphonies, concertos and choral works. Perhaps his best known composition, however, is The Planets (1918), and from that orchestral suite, Jupiter is certainly the piece with which most people today are familiar – even if they are unaware of its composer or provenance. The central melody of Jupiter is “Thaxted” and was, with Holst’s agreement, used for the patriotic hymn “I vow to thee my country”, which no doubt was the source of the melody’s popularity¹. In more recent times, “Thaxted” has been used for the theme song for a Rugby World Cup, and of more importance for us, for a far more appropriate hymn, “O God beyond all praising”.

The 20th century hymn writer, Michael Perry (1942-1996), was born in Kent, and undertook tertiary studies for the ministry at University College London, Oakhill Theological College London, Ridley Hall Cambridge and the University of Southampton. He actually wrote his most well-known hymn, The Calypso Carol, while a student in 1964. It was written for a college concert, but quite serendipitously was made famous by Cliff Richards. As a minister, Perry served at Merseyside, Southampton, Eversley (Hampshire) and Tonbridge (Kent). All the while he was engaged in hymn writing and publishing, and was a member of the committees which produced Psalm Praise (1973) and Hymns for Today’s Church (1982). As a composer, Perry was – quite rightly – fastidious about Copyright, and eschewed the popular belief that hymns should be composed for free “for the Lord”. I thus hasten to point out that the hymn that follows is indeed Copyright (to Mrs B Perry and Jubilate Hymns)!

However it is a wonderful prayer of praise to God, bringing together the majestic melody of Holst with rapturous words of adoration, which begin with the unarguable “O God beyond all praising”, which capture the reality of our inability, ever, adequately to find words for the wonder of the Creator God. I am personally hoping that it finds its way into the next edition of The Australian Hymnbook, which is in preparation.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Holst#The_Planets; <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustav-Theodore-Holst>, both accessed 1 October 2020.

O God beyond all praising,
we worship you today
and sing the love amazing
that songs cannot repay;
for we can only wonder
at every gift you send,
at blessings without number
and mercies without end:
we lift our hearts before you
and wait upon your word,
we honour and adore you,
our great and mighty Lord.

Then hear, O gracious Saviour,
accept the love we bring,
that we who know your favour
may serve you as our king;
and whether our tomorrows
be filled with good or ill,
we'll triumph through our sorrows
and rise to bless you still:
to marvel at your beauty
and glory in your ways,
and make a joyful duty
our sacrifice of praise².

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

The following prayer of confession acknowledges our infidelity to God and our willingness to create our own “gods” out of things that suit us better. It draws on the theme of our passage from Exodus, but you may prefer to pray your own more personal prayer, or to pray a combination of each. God is always ready to hear our confession.

Our indescribable God,
We confess before you our fickleness and faithlessness.
Father, you have called us into relationship with you;
through Jesus Christ, you have freed us from the bonds of our sin;
and you have called us your very daughters and sons.
Yet, O God, we confess that we are so often “fair-weather” disciples.
When the occasion suits us, or the demands are not too hard,
we pledge our faithfulness and devotion.
But when the going gets a little tougher,
or the demands or the allures of the world grow stronger,
or our own selfish desires gain the upper hand,
we confess that we can be all too ready to put our faith on the backburner,
and give our devotion to other things.
It's different for each of us, Father –
for some of us, it's our job, or maybe our hobby, or perhaps a project that is absorbing us;
for others it may be our family, our restless desire to travel, our greed for money or things;

² https://www.jubilate.co.uk/songs/o_god_beyond_all_praising accessed 1 October 2020.

for some it may be an addiction to a substance or a lifestyle or to bodily indulgence.

It makes no difference, our Father.

Once our interest is captured, and our enthusiasm kindled,
we can come up with any number of rationalisations to excuse ourselves.

But the truth is that we willingly construct “gods” to supplant you,
idols to which we pay homage with our time, our money and our devotion.

Forgive us, we pray.

Remind us of the incredible gift of your mercy and grace,
and grant us the focus and self-discipline always to keep our lives centred on the Lord Jesus.

For we do know where our true allegiance lies,
and we are ashamed of our faithlessness and fickleness.

We ask this in the blessed name of Jesus.

Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

God’s mercy is beyond measure.

God’s mercy quells the anger God justly feels at our sinfulness.

It was through God’s mercy that he sent his son, Jesus, to die for our sins.

Jesus rose, defeating the very power of sin,
and freeing us to live in God’s grace.

So if we confess our sins and repent of them,
they are forgiven for Jesus’ sake.

Thanks be to God!

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Exodus 32:1-20 (Lectionary is only 32:1-14)

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalms 106: 1-6, 19-23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

7 **Prayers for the world and Lord’s Prayer**

Yesterday (Saturday) was World Mental Health Day. Thankfully, in the last decade or so, mental health has come out of the closet, at least to some extent, and there is less shame attached to those who suffer from maladies that affect the mind rather than the body. This has been aided enormously by public figures who have acknowledged openly their own battle with mental health issues. However, we still have a long way to go, and World Mental Health Day is an annual reminder of the importance for every one of us – sufferer or not – to be mindful of the impact of mental illnesses on individuals and on society as a whole. This is particularly important this year, as we all know that mental conditions have been exacerbated by lockdown conditions and other impacts of the pandemic. You may, of course, choose to pray about other things that are important to you at the moment.

Lord our God,

We pray for the ongoing struggle of our society, and of countless individuals,
with mental health issues.

Father, we confess that we have often not been good
even at acknowledging the reality of mental illness.

We have branded it as “weakness”,

and denied the suffering of its victims.

So today, we pray first of all for all who suffer a mental affliction, permanently, or for a period of time, or spasmodically.

There are so many conditions, Father –

depression, schizophrenia, bipolar, anxiety and panic attacks, eating disorders, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, autism spectrum disorders, Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.

We bring before you all who suffer from these or any other illnesses.

Be with them, be their comforter and their healer.

We pray too for the professionals who work with the mentally ill –

for psychologists and psychiatrists and counsellors,

and particularly for mental health nurses, who often face very difficult front-line situations.

We pray that you will guide them and inspire them;

that they will ever hold out hope for the mentally ill, and never give up;

and that they will always treat sufferers with dignity and respect, despite their affliction.

We pray also for other front-line workers in organisations like Lifeline and Beyond Blue, who daily attend to crisis situations.

Encourage them in their life-saving work.

May the organisations which provide these services be well resourced, and always offer a beacon of hope for those whose lives appear hopeless.

We pray for all the other not-for-profit support organisations around mental health,

all seeking through volunteers to advocate for mental health issues,

and to encourage and fund research in the whole area of mental disorders.

Finally, our Father, we pray for ourselves.

Some of us will be current sufferers,

and any of us may have been or could be at some time.

We know the statistics.

But whether or not we do succumb to a mental illness,

may we always have attitudes which are supportive and respectful of those who are ill.

May we never be complicit in shaming them,

or making them reluctant to speak about their condition.

May we be generous in our support and in our giving,

that ultimately our society might come to realise that afflictions of the mind

are no different from afflictions of the body –

they can happen to anyone, they occasion great suffering and loss,

they carry no shame, and they are treatable.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:

Our father in heaven,

Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come;

Your will be done

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread,

and forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil,

for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,

now and forever.

Amen

8 **Conclusion**

As you finish, resolve to own up to and deal with your own golden calves.
For the world is only in its right perspective when God is at its centre.
So as you return to your daily world, resolve to be God's people in it.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with you and abide with you evermore.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
THE GOLDEN CALF

We cannot read the story of the golden calf without, at least at first, being bewildered. Exodus began with God acting to liberate his people from their slavery in Egypt, and to secure their escape from pharaoh's pursuing army. Three weeks ago, we read about God's daily provision of manna to feed the hungry Israelites on their journey through the Sinai. Two weeks ago, we saw how God dramatically endorsed Moses as his chosen leader of the people, the one whose leadership would bring them to the new life that was in God. Then last week, we saw God's gift of his Commandments, a prescription of how the new life of freedom should be lived. Everything we have seen so far in the Exodus narrative is about the grace, generosity and love of God for his people.

From last week to this, the Lectionary has skipped over a few chapters, in which the important thing for us to know as we approach today's reading is that Moses, along with Joshua and some seventy other leaders of the people, has been called into God's presence and has thus left the Israelites encamped and under Aaron's leadership. Prior to Moses' departure, the Israelites swore obedience to God's instructions.

"All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." (Exodus 24:7)

But it didn't take long before that promise was forgotten. Chapter 32 opens with disquiet in the camp. Moses has been gone longer than expected. No one knew when, or if, he would return. We might accept that the people's insecurity may lead them to give up on Moses, and to seek out a new leader – which indeed they do – but they go much further than that. They also give up on God; or, more correctly, they seek to manufacture their own god. The short account of this is instructive:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in 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!"

Perhaps the first thing to notice is that the Israelites strip God of the credit for bringing them up out of Egypt, credit which was God's by right (20:2), and instead suggest that Moses had brought about their escape. This is *not* an endorsement of Moses, whom they are in the process of abandoning; what it *is* is the deliberate disempowerment of God. His mighty deed which had led to their freedom is simply denied.

The second thing to notice is that, when the people go to Aaron, who had been left in charge, and approach him as their leader, Aaron's response demonstrates both weakness, and alarming disloyalty both to Moses and to God. While it may be understandable that the people, and Aaron too, were wondering what had become of Moses, even that they were now assuming that he may not be going to return, what is absolutely not okay is that Aaron neither expresses faith in Moses' eventual return, nor accepts the mantle of leadership reluctantly or conditionally. Further, without argument, he immediately complies with the people's outrageous request that he "make gods for us". Aaron appears to be eager to jump into Moses' leadership role; and to curry the people's favour so as to secure his position, he will jettison all he knows to be true and right. He will ditch the true God.

The third thing here concerns the "god(s)" which Aaron manufactures for the people. The Israelites

are once again hankering for the customs of Egypt, where the gods were of this kind – tangible, manmade objects of precious metal. Whereas the Israelites had been afraid even to hear God’s voice (20:19), this manufactured god will be completely under their control. It is to “go on before us”, so “leading” them, not where God would have them go, but to destinations that will be less challenging, less demanding of them, because this god will be at their own behest. Perhaps this god will even lead them back to Egypt.

The situation grows worse. Having built an altar to the golden calf god, Aaron proclaims that the next day will be a festival day. But he profanes the name of God by calling it “a festival to the LORD”. The new god is not being spoken of deferentially, that it is their new lord. When English translations of the Old Testament capitalise Lord as LORD, the word being translated is the Hebrew *YHWH*, usually rendered *Yahweh*, the untranslatable divine name. So what Aaron is doing is transferring the honour due to the one true God to this manmade idol, speaking of it as if it were, not a new god, but the true God. What does that mean? That this is a deliberate attempt to reconstruct God in an image that suits the Israelites. Instead of God being the master of Israel, the Israelites want to be masters of God. They want a tame God who suits their convenience.

The ramifications of this, had the matter been allowed to go on for any length of time, would be unthinkable. We get a glimpse of the danger in the events of the next day, the “festival to the LORD.

They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel..... When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” But he said,

*“It is not the sound made by victors,
or the sound made by losers;
it is the sound of revellers that I hear.”*

Although not stated in so many words, it would appear that what had begun as a day of religious observance, albeit to a false god, had quickly descended into debauchery. *This* god did not restrict its people’s freedom by imposing anything so inconvenient as the Ten Commandments. *This* god sanctioned the kind of behaviours that often accompanied the worship of foreign gods, which involved self-indulgence and excess. Beyond our reading, verse 25 describes the people as having “run wild” to the point of making a laughing stock of themselves.

I began by suggesting that we could not read this account without being, at least at first, bewildered. God had done so much for the Israelites. He was “the God who brought you up out of Egypt” and gave them their freedom. God had shown himself faithful, generous and gracious to Israel. God had endorsed Moses as his chosen leader. And yet, at the slightest suspected hiccup, the people’s faith deserts them, Aaron eagerly snatches Moses leadership role and the people seek to contain God into an idol of their own making, imbued with all their worst instincts. But, on reflection, perhaps we shouldn’t be bewildered at all.

While the circumstances of the 21st century are very different from those of the Exodus, whose dramatic setting is over three millennia ago, human nature has surely not changed. Like the Israelites, we can be impatient, reluctant to wait on God, and all too ready to abandon God when things don’t go as we expect. When our prayers go consistently unanswered – or we do not perceive an answer – our frustration can lead us to question our faith, and quickly to forget the many blessings God has showered upon us over many years. God isn’t there, doing what he’s supposed to do, doing our bidding. So God’s gone. Apparently he’s not coming back. Time to move on. I’m sure you’ve heard sentiments to this effect, or similar. Perhaps you’ve felt their pull yourself.

And we very easily find ourselves trying to contain God, to shape God into an image that suits us,

and to deny God his power. Perhaps we just want a tame God, one who won't challenge us or inconvenience us. So God has to fit into our rules, our definition, our preconceptions. God can't do that; God isn't like that; God wouldn't ask that. Once we've established the rules that God has to work under, we've got God where we want him. God is at our service, ready to endorse our way of seeing the world, forbidden to place any demands upon us.

Or perhaps a convenient or "pet" God doesn't suit us, and we'd prefer to construct our own god instead. In the modern and incredibly secular Western world, that's not likely to be a physical idol, but we have plenty of gods around us, to whom their worshipers are absolutely beholden. For many people, it's money or material goods; for some it's their career; for some it's their insatiable urge to travel; for some it's sex; for some it's a hobby; for some it might even be their home or their car or even their wardrobe. I'm quite sure you know people like that. The attraction of such gods is that they happen to coincide with our own values. They ask nothing of us that we wouldn't give anyway, and as they grow more and more demanding, we convince ourselves that our worship of them is a good thing. Our equivalent of the Israelites' revelry is the permission that these gods of our own making give us to indulge ourselves in whatever way suits us. We are oblivious to the harm they are doing both to ourselves and those around us.

So, if you translate the Israelites' apostasy into a 21st century context, we are scarcely different from them. We have little reason to express bewilderment at their behaviour, if we are honest with ourselves.

If that is the case, the outcome of the story of the golden calf takes on particular relevance for us. The outcome itself reminds us that God is by no means a tame God, nor does God conform to our rules.

First, in the story God is angry. God has "fierce wrath" and is planning to bring disaster on his people (v. 12). He is ready to fulfil his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through Moses' line alone, and abandon the remainder of the Israelite nation.

The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

Perhaps God's anger surprises us. We hear so often the message that God is a God of love and loves us unconditionally – as well we should! But we would not be in need of God's grace and forgiveness if our sinfulness didn't matter, if it did not make God angry. God abhors sin. It is good to be reminded that God is not a tame, domesticated God who conveniently turns a blind eye to our wrongdoing, and indulgently accepts the slaps we metaphorically land on his face. God does get angry! "Fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom," the writer of Proverbs reminds us (Proverbs 9:10). Fear can mean "awe", but it can also quite correctly mean "fear". It is at our peril that we forget the anger that our sin causes God.

But God's anger and justice are not the end of the story. It is God who alerts Moses to the apostasy, and sends Moses hastening back to the camp. Even before he tells Moses of his anger, he is commissioning Moses to respond to the situation. Then Moses pleads for the people.

But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by

your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

And God relents! Indeed, the Hebrew word that is translated “relented” can also be translated as “had compassion”³. God’s anger turned to compassion! It may be tempting to credit Moses with marshalling such persuasive arguments, but remember that it was God whose very first instinct was to send Moses to his people. Moses was intervening for his people because that is what God had commissioned him to do. God’s love was ahead of God’s anger.

The end of the story is not all sweetness and roses. Our reading does not include the remainder of the chapter, in which three thousand ringleaders are put to death, and a plague is visited upon the remaining Israelites. However, even in the verses we have, it is clear that, despite God’s forgiveness, sin nevertheless has its consequences. This is symbolised by Moses’ action in pulverising the golden calf, mixing it with water, and making the Israelites drink it. The action is akin to our modern saying, You’ve made your bed, now lie in it. The Israelites are forced to confront what they have done, and it has, metaphorically, to be purged out of their system.

Again, it is good to be reminded that our sins do have consequences. The fact that God forgives us certainly takes away our guilt, but what we have done, to ourselves or to others, has still been done. This is perhaps most starkly brought out when someone guilty of a heinous and public crime repents and finds Christ’s forgiveness. They are truly forgiven; let there be no misunderstanding. But they must still face those whose loved ones they have harmed, whose lives they have destroyed, and the agony of their remorse can be heartrending to see. They must drink in the tragedy of their sin, as the Israelites had to accept the consequences of what they had done.

Yet we cannot end that way. Yes, the consequences cannot be undone. But on the cosmic scale, sin can be, and is, forgiven. In this story, God’s anger is real, but God’s mercy is stronger. Moses pleads for his people, and God had mercy upon them, and they are forgiven. Time and time again, we find a precursor to the gospel in the stories of Exodus. Perhaps you recall the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans?

Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
(Romans 8:33ff)

As Moses was commissioned by God to intercede for his people, so the risen Lord Jesus Christ intercedes with God for us. Later in the Exodus story, Moses offered his own life on behalf of his people (32:32), but Moses was not an acceptable sacrifice. The ultimate conquest of sin had to await the perfect sacrifice, when the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, gave his life for all sinners, and rose from the grave in triumphant victory over sin for all time.

In the Exodus story of the golden calf, God’s mercy spares his people. In the story of Jesus Christ, God’s mercy was embodied in his Son, as God reached out in loving grace to all humankind, caught up in their worship of a thousand different manifestations of the golden calf. As in Exodus, so in the gospel, God’s love and mercy, not God’s righteous anger, are his defining characteristic.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

³ James K Bruckner, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, 2008), p. 285.