



# *Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



Sunday 15 October 2023

### READINGS

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6,20-24; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

*“Many are called but few are chosen,”*

The readings for this Sunday do not present themselves as being immediately connected. We have the famous story of the golden calf, in Exodus 32, and then the parable of the wedding banquet in Matthew 22. The two stories are seemingly unrelated: one about a heinous act of idolatry on the part of the Israelite people in the absence of the presence of God and of Moses; the other, seemingly a story about the refusal of people to accept God’s invitation to the wedding banquet of his Son and, by extension, to enter his kingdom.

At first glance, you may think idolatry is a fairly straightforward practice to understand. In reality, there is a certain complexity about it. Psalm 135:15-18 reads “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them.” This passage appears almost verbatim in Psalm 115.

The principle of these verses is elaborated in Romans 1:21b-23. Paul speaks about an inversion in the created order – that which is created is exulted above the Creator and this imbalance or inversion has an ontological and epistemological effect on human beings. In other words, it greatly impacts the way the human mind works – “claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal humans or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.” As a result of this, human beings “became futile in their thinking and their foolish minds were darkened.”

What though is at the root of the practice of idolatry? Is it simply an inclination toward rebellion against God? Or is there something in the idol itself which helps to facilitate its veneration by human beings? Historically, idols were composed of precious material. In the case of Exodus 32 this is gold. Such precious materials are produced in a labour intensive manner. It takes a high amount of human labour to extract and refine gold to its finished product. Idols themselves are often fashioned in a skilful and ornate way so as to make them aesthetically appealing and attractive. Thus there is something about the idols composition – the fact that they are composed of precious metals – as well as the amount of labour and skill, the amount of human effort and energy expended on them – which creates a fetishism about the idol. Because of these factors, they appear to have life-like qualities or to possess certain innate powers and, as a result, are worshipped or venerated.

As Paul explains this represents an inversion in the created order because essentially the human (the creator) is worshipping the product of his or her labour (they are worshipping the created). It is not difficult to see that, as modern people, many of us have similar relationships with the produce of our labour. When I say, our labour, I don't mean necessarily your labour and my labour, but our collective labour as a society, and that represented by Chinese sweatshops which produces some of our smart devices. If we pause to consider how much time we devote to these products, how much our attention they command, it is not difficult to see that they are often at risk of subsuming attention we might otherwise give to God or to our fellow human beings.

There is not too much time left to consider the parable of the wedding banquet. Which is a pity because, to understand some of the dynamics at play, one has to have a minimal understanding of how systems of patronage worked in antiquity. As a matter of fact, they do not function in an entirely different way today.

In ancient times, and in particular in first-century Judea and Galilee, wealthy landowners would hold occasional banquets for the many poor serfs who serviced their land. On the surface this was a pretence at their generosity and benevolence when in reality the relation of the vast majority of peasants to such landowners was a deeply exploitative one. The wealthy landowners had to balance things quite carefully. If they were too exploitative, or if conditions for the peasantry got too harsh, and the "grand feasts" or banquets were too few and far between, they ran the risk of a disillusioned and agitated peasantry, and one that might rise up in revolt. Of course, because the wealthy landowner possessed the necessary resources, the revolt could be quelled and quashed by military intervention, as indeed happens in Matthew 22.

Jesus, as he does in many of the parables, is describing the real-life situation of the average person living in first-century Judea and Galilee. It is a lamentable situation to be sure. But framing it in terms of a parable, and framing it, as he often does on either side with "the kingdom of God/heaven is like..." and a pithy and sometimes paradoxical one-sentence conclusion like "the first will be last and the last will be first," or "to those who have more will be given, but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away," or, as in Matthew 22, "many are called but few are chosen," allows the parable to mean the opposite of what it seems to be saying with regard to the kingdom of God.

For here, those called to the banquet initially are the religious and political elite of first-century Judea and Galilee, while those who ultimately attend, are the poor, lame and disenfranchised. As we continue to contemplate these things, may God's hand of guidance, protection and blessing remain upon us.

Amen