



Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 11 October 2020

READINGS

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

The Unpredictable God

On the twenty sixth of March, when the national lockdown began, many of us were confronted with this question:

Are we more interested in who God is, or in who God is FOR US?

With churches closed, gatherings banned, no access to our usual groups, fellowship and worship services, we discovered how much we had taken for granted. When these props were removed – no more shared chalice, then no more communion, then no more singing we saw in a new light what they meant for us as Christians and in particular as Anglican Christians, and we had to explore what our worship would be like without them. How would we relate to God and experience God's presence?

I hope that both consciously and unconsciously, we began to realise how much of what we thought of as 'God', was really just who we needed God to be. God is still God without these things. God is still worshipped and glorified in the absence of all these things.

A number of parishioners have shared with us how, although the past months have been difficult and even painful, they have grown in spiritual maturity and their relationship with God. Many have found new resources or used the ones they have in new ways. Read the Bible differently, prayed differently, changed their routines.

St Michael's has been incredibly privileged to have the resources, technology and a talented and committed team who learned more each week in order to offer online services, emailed newsletters and liturgies, an upgraded website and mailing list, zoom Bible studies and so much more to our parishioners and a wider community.

Even so, we are aware that not all of these have been equally accessible to everyone. People yearned for presence and connection. In each case it has been a personal journey for each individual in learning how to access and apply what was offered. As a community of St Michael's were able to identify what was most important and helpful for us, what we missed most and why, all the while recognising that God is not tied to this building or these practices.

Many parishes across the Diocese weren't as fortunate as we have been. Each one offered what it could: a sermon delivered via a whatsapp voice note, a prayer chain, printed liturgies to be collected and shared and so on. What I have found so interesting is that, in parishes where there was a choice of what to provide, such different choices were made. Some priests celebrated the Eucharist online, ours didn't. In some parishes music was not essential, for us it was. Watching services from around the world on Facebook we saw short sermons and long sermons, we saw priests in their studies, their sitting rooms and their gardens. With and without vestments. The Dean of Canterbury Cathedral shared the spotlight with his cat.

Why am I offering this detailed overview? Because in all our differences, our communities demonstrated who God is for us, in valid, helpful ways, while at the same time learning that not one of these things is necessary or adequate to express who God is. And I believe that if we did claim that any of these things, practices or places or our church buildings, our organ, or our favourite priest were essential for God's presence, then we have made our golden calf.

The Israelites had associated Moses' presence with God's presence: if Moses is there, God is with them. While travelling through the desert, they had the visible signs of the pillar of fire at night and the cloud by day. Now, they are camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, the travelling has stopped, they are forced to be still and Moses has disappeared up the mountain to commune with God for 40 days. They experience a failure of trust.

In the stillness they felt abandoned, disconnected, impatient and anxious. It sounds a lot like what happened to us when lockdown arrived and our world stood still.

In response to those feelings, the people of Israel defined who they needed God to be. The nations around them had material rituals and idols that provided a sense of security and perhaps the Israelites felt inferior or jealous as well.

For years, in Egypt, they had seen gods worshipped that were visual and measurable. Now, this God they were following into the wilderness was unpredictable. In their uncertainty, they reached for what was familiar, and tried to make God more predictable. Rather than trusting Moses' promise to return in 40 days, waiting for a revelation of the invisible God, they brought God to themselves. They chose the symbol of the bull calf, a familiar image to the surrounding nations as a sign of military might and fertility. They moulded it into a manageable form. They didn't make it their God, but they defined it as the sign of God amongst them, reducing the great I Am to suit their need for who they thought he should be. They wanted the familiarity of God on their terms, not trusting the revelation of God on God's terms.

Collectively, our online covid services have revealed to us the multiple ways in which Anglicans define and experience the presence of God. We have a conglomeration of ideas about God that we relate to. None of them are wrong, but they are incomplete. We realise that they are preferences. We ought to be humble in recognising that our best effort cannot capture the fullness of who God is. We can easily make the mistake that St Augustine defines as idolatry: worshiping what should be used or using what should be worshiped.

As humans we long for connection with God. After a time such as this, spent in the wilderness, we hunger for more. But we must resist the tendency to go and manufacture something more to fill that gap. Need is not harmful, but dependence is. Dependence comes from the desire for certainty and that's when we

search for or manufacture a version of God we can control. Religious clutter and golden calves. Now is a good time to review where we stand on that.

How are we allowing God to meet our spiritual needs? Are there any golden calves we have made for ourselves as substitutes while away from church? As we return, are we open to new revelations and experiences, the unpredictable presence of an Almighty God? If we come with our own limited ideas of who we think God should be, and how God will be present to us, could that become a golden calf that will lead to disappointment?

Anglicanism is a beautiful tradition in which we can be guided, we can learn and grow. We've seen this in the diversity of Anglican services from churches around the world that we've been able to share online.

My prayer is that we will never stop trusting God's ongoing revelation and never feel so satisfied or arrogant to think that our experience of God is complete. Thomas Merton wrote, "A journey of clarity and ease can never reach a God of mystery and love." We gather because we long to grow in our knowledge and worship of God, not simply to admire the image of God that we have created.