

Sermon 2nd June 2013 - "Old and new idols"

Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT

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1 Kings 18:20-21, 30-40; Luke 7:1-10

What a horrible story! The contest at Mount Carmel between the prophets of Baal and Elijah testifies powerfully to the reality of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel; but it ends horribly, with the seizure and killing of scores, possibly hundreds, of the false prophets of Baal. The lectionary which provides our Bible readings every Sunday wants to spare us from this vengeful horror, proposing we conclude the reading at verse 39, with the people's response of worship of the one true God, but that sanitising of our Bible readings feels dishonest to me, so we read the whole of it this morning, including the atrocious end of the story in verse 40.

The notion of local gods, tribal gods, was very strong in the ancient Middle East. Often referred to as Baal, which simply means "master", these gods were represented in cultic images, usually the figure of a man or sometimes half bull and half man. For the religion of Israel this was anathema, for the second of the ten commandments unequivocally states "you shall not make for yourself an idol... you shall not bow down to them or worship them".

Idolatry raises its head also in our gospel reading today. It was most unusual for a non-Jew, the Roman centurion in today's story of healing, to expect a Jewish person to come inside his house. Non-Jewish or Gentile houses were regarded as unclean, not least because they would have within them idols of false gods, perhaps of a local tribal god or one of the Greek or Roman gods. Yet in today's story Jesus shows willing to go to the centurion's house, and the fact that Jewish elders supply a fine reference for the centurion will have helped. Then the centurion himself has second thoughts, and sends another message to Jesus "you don't need to come to my house, I am not worthy, but only speak the word and let my servant be healed". And Jesus honours such faith and the servant is indeed healed.

For us Christians, the use of an image, a statue or a painting, as an aid to devotion towards God, has always been controversial. The second commandment is clear and direct, but does it mean we can use no picture, no visible object to enhance our worship? During the Reformation years in parts of Europe in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries – notably in England – churches were stripped of their statues and paintings. In some Reformation traditions not even a cross or a candle was permitted, for fear they would be treated as idols, as objects of worship, rather than worship of God alone. And as for statues of saints or of Mary, well, they were unthinkable in some of our past traditions.

Thirty years ago I was minister of Scots Uniting Church in Hobart. As we came to my first Christmas there, I raised the question of using an Advent wreath. Well, they'd never had candles in that church, which dated back to 1824 and was obviously of a strong Presbyterian tradition. The elders discussed it long and hard – would candles be idolatrous, or popish? I'm glad to say they decided yes, and the Advent wreath went ahead without too much anxiety.

I can add to the candles uncertainty an earlier controversy at Scots Church in Hobart. Back in the 1860s they decided to purchase and install a pipe organ, to supersede the tuning forks which had to that date been the sole accompaniment to their singing of the psalms. The decision came only after much argument and a split in the congregation. "An instrument of the devil" was the accusation against. "It might lead to dancing in the church" was another. "Idolatry" said some. The congregation eventually decided yes – but a sizeable group left the

church over that and set up another Presbyterian congregation elsewhere in the town – a congregation which thirty years later purchased their own pipe organ.

It's not hard to succumb to the temptation of idolatry. Anything in our lives which we put ahead of God can justifiably be regarded as idolatry – anything which takes the place of God, anything which becomes our prime goal in life rather than God. In our culture we're not likely to populate our homes and gardens with statues of local gods or tribal deities, and bow down to them, but other more subtle idols loom large. We are constantly tempted, for instance, to pursue personal wealth and security as our chief aims in life rather than service of God. Lesser idols may be our cherishing of personal power or social status or sport or a hobby which becomes an obsession. Even the pursuit of happiness can become an idol which blocks our perception of God, our awareness of God and our following of God. Sadly, for some Christians, their denominational allegiance or some particular theological emphasis or even the use of the Bible can become their major focus, a surrogate for genuine faith and discipleship. The question is who or what do we really worship.

A few weeks back we had readings from the book of Revelation. One of the discoveries from Revelation was its strong message that we are called to worship God, nothing less. When at the end of his writings, John wanted to bow down to the angel whom he regarded as the bearer of the revelations he'd received, the angel's response was swift "You must not do that! I am just a fellow servant with you and your comrades...worship God!" (Revelation 22:9).

Here at Wesley we are part of the Protestant stream of Christianity. Rather unusually, even in our Methodist tradition, we have a painting of Jesus, an image, in a prominent position, over here in the chapel. We also have many other material and visual aids to our worship – more than one cross, candles, Christian symbols, stained glass windows, flowers, even the bread and wine of Communion. These are all fine - as long as we never bow down to them as idols to be worshipped, as long as we treat them as aids to our worship and discipleship.

Since we've learnt far more about the nature of God from Jesus – that God is understanding, self-giving and always wanting to offer us his love and his forgiveness – we know that God will not act vengefully, as happened to the prophets of Baal almost 3000 years ago. But we still need to guard against idolatry, the bowing down to false gods. As the first commandment says "you shall have no other gods before me".

To the glory of God, Amen.