

God at the Centre
Exodus 32:7-14
Sept 15, 2019

Right in the heart of the financial district of New York City stands the famous Bull sculpted by Aruro Di Modica. The bull is 7000 pounds in weight and is one of the world's best-known symbols of American capitalism and one of the biggest tourist draws in the financial district. Di Modica said in a statement that he was inspired by the 1987 stock market crash to create the bull, selling his family farm in Sicily to help fund the project.

The "Charging Bull" first arrived in front of the New York Stock Exchange under the cover of night on Dec. 15, 1989, but because it had no permit police removed it. So great was public support for the sculpture that on Dec. 20, the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation arranged for the bull to have a stomping ground in Bowling Green, the city's oldest park.

We have all heard the term 'bull market' meaning that the stock market prices are rising faster than average. Under the sign of the bull Western capitalism continues to be the driving force in modern life. We have become familiar with terms like **bottom line, freedom 55, investment portfolio, RRSP's**, and so on. Money, materialism, or as the New Testament calls it, **Mammon**, has become so central and dominant in our lives that many have become seduced by its power.

Our story today is sad for many reasons. It saddens us because it is yet another example of our human tendency to break promises and give into our fears. The children of Israel have heard the voice of God and have witnessed God's presence as they wait at the foot of the mountain. Moses has ascended to receive the Ten Commandments and the regulations for the conduct of worship. Moses is receiving instructions on their future social, religious and economic life together. To shape them into the people of God the priesthood will be formed, a tabernacle will be built where God will symbolize his

presence among them on their journey, and the Ark of the Covenant and mercy seat will be made to be placed at the centre of the holy place within the tabernacle. This is where God will meet with them through the priest. All this is spelled out in Exodus 25 through 31.

But Moses has been gone for a long while and the people are getting restless. Where is this Moses, they ask? Why don't we make our own gods Aaron? Under pressure Aaron sculpts a golden calf out of their gold jewelry. Once finished Aaron says, ***These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.***

One can't help thinking that Aaron is being somewhat sarcastic here, as if to say, "sure this golden calf is the one who led you out of Egypt and provided for your needs these past months. Sure it is!" Go ahead knock yourselves out in idol worship; go ahead, be plain dumb.

I realize that we find all this rather primitive. In modern life we have risen above such superstition and idol worship. We prize reason, science, psychology, and education. The idea of making a calf out of gold and worshipping it seems to a tad simple minded and superstitious. But is it possible that our gods have become just a little more sophisticated?

If, as the bible teaches, we were created by the God of heaven and earth in his image and to be in relationship to God, then it surely follows that worship is one of the key ingredients of this relationship. I am saying that the human family, whether connected to a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple, cannot avoid worship of someone or something as we are, as it were, hot-wired by our very nature to worship. It is a question of what or whom we worship, not whether we do or not.

The first and most important commandment is short, powerful and demanding. It reads, ***you shall have no other gods before me.*** When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment is he pointed to this one and loving our neighbour as ourselves. On these two, he said, hang the entire Ten Words of the Law.

The tragedy of our story is how quickly these pilgrims from Egypt broke the central commandment. They built a calf of gold, called it their god and bowed down to worship it.

If we have relegated idols of gold and silver to the dustbin in our sophisticated society, what other gods do we tend to run after? Let me suggest that one of the most compelling gods, **Mammon**, has seduced many in modern society all over the world. This is not a new god or one confined to our seemingly sophisticated age. Jesus identified this god as dangerous and powerful. He called it **Mammon** or wealth. We can simply call it money, materialism, or treasure for it boils down to the same thing. Jesus warned the poor of his day about reliance on wealth. He told many stories about the danger of putting money on the level of a god as it would tend to destroy our souls.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: ***Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*** He goes on to say: ***No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6:22ff)***

Last week we read the passage from Luke 14 about the cost of discipleship. I included the last two verses this week we didn't read last week. Jesus says: *So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Luke 14:33-35)*

Let's be clear about what this doesn't mean. Wealth, material comfort, wise investment for the future, both for us and our families is not what Jesus is calling into question. The bible is clear that God intended life to be a rich, rewarding experience lived with spiritual and material blessing. The material world has been convincingly stamped with God's approval with the birth of God's son in human flesh. Jesus warns us who are the modern rich to be careful to keep wealth, money in perspective. **Mammon** can so easily take over our lives and become the little god that we unconsciously worship.

How difficult, Jesus tells us, for rich folk to enter God's kingdom. The reason is obvious. Who needs the God of Abraham, David, the prophets, Jesus, and the church when we have our lives hermetically sealed with our bank balance, our property, and our investments? Our fragility as human beings causes us to surround our lives with the protection **Mammon** affords. Without our material safety net we might feel vulnerable to forces that threaten us. And so we build the protective walls as high as possible to keep misfortune and fate from our doors.

The power of this old fashioned and yet modern god **Mammon** is not difficult to identify in modern, Western life. The bull in New York, our frenzied lives that are eaten up with work, the symbols of success that we elevate to cult status in modern life, the huge entertainment complex which serves as a sort of drug to keep us reasonably together, and the modern Mall with all the trappings of the cathedral of consumerism: all of these and more are ways **Mammon** expresses its power over us and keeps our inner restlessness reasonably under raps.

Writing to the Christians in Thessalonica Paul says of them that they **turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God... (1Thes 1:9)** I wonder if we can identify with this transformation. Where your treasure is there is your heart, Jesus taught. Where is your heart today? Have you made that turn from the idols modern life offers us to this living God who blesses us with peace, joy and love?

The story of the golden calf is sad because it brings us face to face with the human tragedy of people making the wrong choice. Moses will utter the famous words when he comes back down the mountain and witnesses the scene, **who is on the Lord's side, come to me.** The invitation continues to be offered to us. God desires the best for us. Worship the true and living God and our humanity will be full and rich. Worship the mean little gods of our own creation and our life will shrink, our soul dry up, and our future will be uncertain.

Amen

