**8th October 2017
Exodus 21.1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Matthew 21.33-46

 In Place of God?**

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen*

This week Hauke, our Time for God Volunteer, told me he’d once again be joining the team that goes into schools called Open the Book. They present bible stories in assemblies and a fortnight ago Hauke joined them for the first time and his role was the serpent in the Creation Story. Guess what, he said to me on Tuesday, I’ve been promoted and tomorrow I’m God!

Not bad going: serpent to God in just seven days!

God is our theme this morning, as I suppose he is every Sunday.

Today we are reflecting on him through the prism of that first commandment read to us earlier by Norma. Exodus 20 gives us the ten and the first reads like this: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You must have no other gods beside me and you must not make a carved image for yourself….

I suspect we’ve always been drawn to the carved images. We even call people we admire and aspire to be like, our idols.

Our Muslim friends avoid any representation of God in their worship spaces and instead of pictures at their mosques they have quotes from the Koran adorn their buildings in the most exquisite calligraphy possible – just their way of emphasising the idea that no image could ever fully do justice to the divine.

Yet, the story goes, even as Moses received these Ten Commandments at the summit of Mount Sinai, down below the people had become frustrated by the remoteness and mystery of it all. So, they built a Golden Calf, a carved image, something immediate and tangible, and they danced around it and bowed down before it. It was soothing and comforting. It’s what their neighbours did after all, so why shouldn’t they follow ‘best practice’ too?

When Moses descends Sinai, so full of hope, he plummets into the deepest despair when he sees what they have done and drops the stone tablets upon which the Commandments were written.

Isn’t it a story about longing for God? And a story of trying to put a face to God. Yet it’s also a narrative with a warning that in our impatience we can all too quickly turn to certainties instead of mystery. The writer of Exodus is in no doubt that however eager the people were on their spiritual pilgrimage – building a golden calf was a wrong turning on that journey of faith.

So, what do we make of God through the prism of the first commandment?

I think it warns us not to try to ‘capture’ God and put him in a box.

So seeking God is one thing, but thinking you can define him may be just a little over ambitious.

Seeking God is about many things and it’s certainly about exploring.

From an early age we started to ask many questions not only about the ‘hows’ of science, but also of the ‘whys’ of faith.

We are born with inquisitive minds. Our Jewish cousins begin their Passover Seder meals with questions asked by the children. It’s a wonderful way the begin a ritual and we Christians really have got nothing that mirrors it.

Jesus seems to love the questioning mind. He taught as a Rabbi by sitting down with his disciples asking them questions whilst answering theirs.

Exploring faith, at least in a Christian context, is about exploring the stories and message of Jesus. It’s about taking Jesus’ seriously.

In today’s New Testament reading we heard the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants who closed their minds to the owner. He sent them messengers, and even his son, but their minds and ways remained closed.

It was a coded rebuke by Jesus to the religious authorities of his day that they too had closed their minds – to God. They had treated the prophets badly and would soon crucify the son. Time and time again Jesus encounters people who cannot think outside the box and for whom religious security means a rigid adherence to a rule based faith.

When religion becomes a closed system, it can no longer breath.

When any of us feel that we have arrived at a spiritual utopia in which we now hold the total truth, then there is nowhere for us to go anymore on the journey of faith.

But that, I suggest, is not where most of us believe we have arrived.

Most of us want to carry on exploring, asking questions and discovering new insights to faith. We want to reflect on life as it really is – with all its joys and sorrows – and make our everyday experiences of life part of our faith paradigm too.

So can a Seeker after Truth ever really ‘define’ God?

Well, to some extent we’ll constantly be trying to do that – but we never arrive at the end point because all our seeking is just a work in progress.

But, we’ll want, quite naturally, to celebrate the understandings and insights that have come our way. If you’ve been baptised as a believer you’ve probably made the creedal statement ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ and if you’ve had your baby baptised you probably made promises in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our faith is inevitable defined by theological ideas and spiritual constructs and these can become a positive and enabling framework for us.

What is unhelpful and oppressive, but not altogether uncommon in religious people, is when we begin to define God in an exclusive way – so he becomes ‘our’ God but not our neighbours. Or we decide the ‘true’ God is the one we believe in – not the one our neighbours worship.

When we do that it’s as if we are making a carved image of God, we are putting God into our definition box, into our creedal statements – into a gilded cage made by us. And when it comes to ‘truth’, we have moved on from being its Seekers to its Guardians – as if we can capture God and keep him safe!

When that happens doesn’t our God become too small?

So I think this first commandment encourages us to seek God but warns us against capturing him with definitions that simply fall short and probably say more about us than about God.

Perhaps that’s why, when Moses asks God for his name in Exodus 3, the Hebrew Bible has God reply: I am who I am.

It’s deliberately enigmatic and beyond definition. It’s an invitation to let God be God and live with mystery, surprise and continuous revelation. ‘I am who I am’.

Now, secondly, I think in reflecting on this first commandment against idols I’d also want to say that in a calling to love God we need to be careful that we don’t slip into the idea that our devotion could in any way control God.

Loving God is at the heart of worship and can inspire a life of service.

Jesus hones down these Ten Commandments into two: Love God, he says and love your neighbour.

And maybe we sense that as they danced around the golden calf the people in that story really did feel a religious fervour that was close to love.

In a recent programme all about India Joanna Lumley visited a Meenakshi temple. In it were thousands of Hindu Gods. In her usual respectful and wonderfully empathetic way she observed the great sense of love she encountered at that temple.

At our centre, as human beings, we seem to have this inbuilt longing to love. To love another human being and to love ‘God’.

So, what’s wrong with a carved image? What’s the reason behind this first commandment?

Well, in a sense the carved image, may not, in itself, have been the problem.

All of Israel’s neighbours had religions with idols and maybe if you can put an idol in your pocket or mantel piece you start going down a road that leads to the idea that you can control God – and that becomes the problem.

It almost becomes mechanistic. If I do this, God will do that.

If I bring sacrifices, God will bless the earth.

If I bring prayers, God will grant my wishes.

Even this, if I love God enough, then I will be secure and safe and life won’t harm me.

To be truthful some of the Psalms even read like this.

But we know that isn’t the way life works out.

We don’t have a Talisman God that we wear around our necks like a good luck charm. We can’t make a carved image of the divine and put it in our pocket as an insurance policy.

The Morning Service a few weeks ago on Radio 4 celebrated the life of the fourth Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. He served the people of El Salvador by loving the poor and speaking up for them against a brutal and tyrannical regime. On the 24th March 1980 he was gunned down by government forces whilst celebrating Mass in his own cathedral.

This priest, a 20th century martyr, loved God and neighbour with exemplary devotion. But God didn’t intervene to protect him from death. Oscar Romero paid the ultimate price of love – as he gave his life for the people he loved and served.

We may pray hard for the healing of a loved one, for the safety of a family member, for the resolution of a war or the righting of an international injustice. Yet we cannot force God and we cannot control love.

We cannot put God in our pockets and treat him like a lucky charm.

For, however much we seek to love God we need to pull back from the idea that just because we say our prayers, go to church or read our bibles that we’ll by pass the usual knocks of life. Instead of avoiding them, faith helps us deal with them.

We live with the reality of death and the mystery of sorrow.

Of course, the opposite is also gloriously true.

At times an autumn sunset will set our hearts on fire, the companionship of another individual will make us feel complete, a meal with friends will lift our spirits and a line from a hymn will speak to our souls.

At those moments we sense that God, the mystery of God, I am who I am, is close by, at work and touching our lives – and we are glad.

Perhaps it’s about noticing how and when God turns up. In today’s Parable story of the Vineyard nobody noticed so God was shut out. At the base of Mount Sinai everyone danced around a gilded calf and God was ignored.

How about this week in my seeking after God I don’t try to capture him with my limiting definitions, and as I seek to worship the one who said: I am who I am, I leave behind the notion that I can in any way control God.

Instead I’ll start noticing that he is, in fact, all around me, all the time.

In John’s Gospel Jesus likened the movement of God to the blowing of the wind. No one knows where it comes from or where it is going to.

God is not in a box, he is like the breeze upon our faces, and this week that divine presence will surround us, caress us, push us forward, refresh us and surprise us.

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
*Ian Green, Amersham, 7th October 2017*