

## [Exodus 32:1-14](#)

One of the most common requests I get from people as a minister is, 'Pray for me.' Most of the time that's a privilege, even if sometimes bittersweet, because the person making the request is facing an unpalatable life crisis.

At other times, though, people ask me to pray simply because they don't want to pray themselves. Some even think that it's my job to talk to God about them, not theirs. That's quite different.

And if you want to know what led to the Israelites getting into the mess they do that leads to this shameful story of the golden calf, you could say it was their unwillingness to engage directly and personally with God.

When we read the story last week about the giving of the Ten Commandments, we noticed that the Israelites wanted Moses to speak with God and speak with them; they didn't want to do it themselves.

So now, Moses is busy speaking with God and has been away some while, as we read at the beginning of Exodus 32:

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain (verse 1a)

The biblical scholar Peter Enns comments,

In light of this, it is possible to read the story not as an act of godless rebellion, but as an act of panic on the part of a people who fear they have lost their contact with God.<sup>1</sup>

It is what Enns calls 'frightened impatience'. It begets aggressions towards Aaron and derision towards Moses. When the text says 'they gathered around Aaron' he notes the Hebrew literally says 'they gathered *against* Aaron' (verse 1). Moses, who has brought them up out of Egypt, is now derisively called 'this fellow Moses' (verse 1).

It doesn't make for a healthy atmosphere, does it?

But I would suggest to you that it's not too many miles from situations we experience in the Christian church.

Why? In my experience, there is a surprising number of people in our churches who want someone else to take responsibility for their connection to God. But when things aren't going well, rather than take personal responsibility for their

spiritual life, they panic and start doing all sorts of inappropriate things, much as the Israelites did with the golden calf.

I'm not denying that leaders among the people of God have an important rôle. But the expectations are unrealistic and can be a form of passing the buck.

That's why when I arrived in my last appointment, I quoted Monty Python's *Life Of Brian* at my welcome service. When people come flocking for Brian, his mother tells them, 'He's not the Messiah, he's just a very naughty boy.'

And there are thousands of church members who put messianic expectations on their ministers while not pulling their own weight spiritually. Then, when the church declines (or continues to decline), when memories of past glories fade, they – like the Israelites – engage in 'frightened impatience'.

They come up with all sorts of attitudes, words, and actions that look religious, but which – like the golden calf – are a counterfeit of the real thing.

Since the calf is made out of gold, it mimics the fittings in the tabernacle:

By building the calf out of gold the people want what the tabernacle was intended to do – provide a concrete point of contact between the people and God.<sup>2</sup>

Calves were common idol images in the ancient world. They were not thought to be the 'god' themselves, but a representative of the 'god'. They were equivalent to the ark of the covenant for the Israelites.<sup>3</sup>

The calf is thus a pagan *representation* of the true God. Put otherwise, the Israelites are not saying that this calf and *not* Yahweh brought them out of Egypt, but that Yahweh's *presence* is now associated with this piece of gold. By making the golden calf, Israel has broken not the first commandment but the second.<sup>4</sup>

What we do when we fail to take responsibility for our own relationship with God and when we fall into frightened impatience when God seems silent is that we too make a graven image. We make something that supposedly represents the true God, but which is actually based on the values of the culture around us.

If you are not convinced by that, [a survey was released on Tuesday](#) from the Cultural Research Center of Arizona Christian University. Yes, it's an American

study, but a lot of the findings have resonance for the Church in other Western societies, not least ours. Dr George Barna, the Director of the CRC, noted,

It certainly seems as if the culture is influencing the Church more than the church is influencing the culture.

By way of examples, significant minorities of the churchgoers surveyed no longer believed in objective moral truth, they thought it was better to embrace any faith than no faith, that the Holy Spirit was just a symbol, not a Person of the Godhead, that Jesus sinned on earth, and that human life was not sacred. There are many more troubling examples I could quote.

And if you want a concrete example from British Christian life, look at the way we have adopted the word 'inclusion' or 'inclusiveness'. Before you rise up and lynch me, let me explain.

The whole notion of inclusiveness is very appealing, not least to a Christian tradition like Methodism that has always emphasised that the love of God in the Gospel is an offer to all, not just a select few. So it has some resonances with us.

But there is one massive difference between the secular notion of inclusion and the offer of the Gospel to all people, and it's this. The Gospel call comes with a summons to change our lives. However, inclusiveness means you come without any need to change.

To quote something I've said before, God loves us just as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us as we are.

When we uncritically take over the world's language of inclusiveness, an essential element of the Christian Gospel, namely the call to repentance, is a casualty. What we end up with may look to untutored eyes like the Gospel, but in fact it's a counterfeit. It's a golden calf. We let our culture change the Gospel, instead of the Gospel changing our culture.

This is a form of frightened impatience. So worried are we about the decline and aging of the Church that in our fear we panic ourselves into worldly ways, thinking this will make us more attractive to people.

And sure enough, the Christian church ends up modelling herself on the culture and the politics of the world, rather than the word of God. But the results are disastrous. The Israelites 'indulge in revelry' (verse 5), and the Hebrew word translated 'revelry' is one

which in a number of places has connotations of sexual activity ...  
To say the least, this is not the festival Israel was intended to  
celebrate at the foot of God's holy mountain.<sup>5</sup>

So it is that instead of challenging the world's sin we end up blessing it, even  
joining in, and practising a counterfeit Christianity.

How have we ended up in such a mess? We have chosen to depend on our  
favoured fallible personalities rather than engaging with the voice of God for  
ourselves. And true to our intentions, God has withdrawn for us and silenced  
his voice. After all, we didn't really want to hear it.

What to do, then? The end goal is that we are a people where we all want to  
read the word of God and so hear the voice of God, rather than banishing God  
in favour of preferred human celebrities, or making our own idols as a point of  
contact with God, despite the obvious fallacy that an idol cannot speak.

That is a major change of behaviour for some people. To get there requires a  
spiritual breakthrough, and that's where we need a Moses. Not as our spiritual  
superstar, but as an intercessor.

As Moses sought the favour and mercy of God (verse 11), prayed for the  
honour of God's name (verse 12), and claimed the promises of God (verse 13),  
so the Church has always needed her intercessors. Not just those who pray for  
the world, but those who pray for the Church, too.

And as we in our distance from God and our frightened impatience at the  
decline of the Church build golden calves instead of proclaiming the Gospel, so  
we especially today need those who will wrestle with God in prayer for the  
state of the Church.

Who are the people who will struggle and persist in prayer that the Church  
might be faithful to the Gospel and not keep building golden calves where we  
worship the values of the world rather than God Who is Father, Son, and Holy  
Spirit?

Back at the beginning of August, [we were thinking about Jacob wrestling](#) with  
the mysterious stranger at Peniel who represented God. And we need more  
who will wrestle with God for the Church.

If you are dismayed at the compromises you see the Christian Church  
consistently making, will you wrestle with him in prayer? When you see the  
Church selling her products like religious consumerism, will you pray? When

you see the Church putting aside the servant leadership ways of Jesus for fashionable management theories, will you pray? When the Church's concern for social justice means she sounds no different from party politics, will you pray? When you see the Church baptising secular approaches to sexuality and relationships, will you pray?

We'll have more to say about Moses' intercession in next week's reading, so I won't say any more now.

And yes I know you could perceive that a lot of this week's talk is quite negative about the Church and that there are good things happening too – I promise I'll talk about them at the appropriate time.

But the Scriptures won't let us get away with a rose-tinted view of God's people. And for those times when we take the easy way out and shape faith according to the ways of the world, there need to be warnings.

May God enable us not to allow the world to squeeze us into its mould.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus: The NIV Application Commentary*, p569.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p570.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p571,