

The Ten Commandments

The second article by Neil Richardson in our year-long series



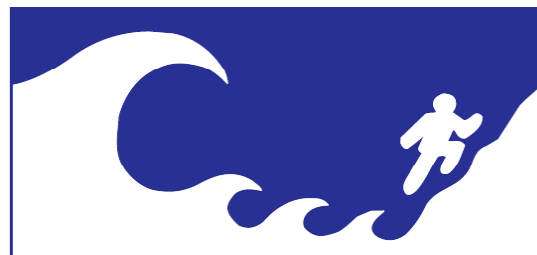
2nd Commandment:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

In ancient Israel, idol worship was the practical expression of forsaking the worship of the one true God. It was deemed to be false because the worshipper bows down to a created object, and not the Creator of all things. This is forsaking true religion for false religion, or **apostasy** as it is known in theology. If you read the various accounts of apostasy in the Jewish Scriptures, you will see how it is often associated with violence of thought and deed. The Prophets of Israel claimed that apostasy was one of the main reasons for the evils which befell Israel, such as defeat in war, drought, flood, death of children, etc. They explained the natural world and its vicissitudes as the result of God rewarding or punishing his people.

Here we have to take a view. Most Christians have rejected the notion of a straightforward link between disaster and the will of God. This link makes God a cruel and punitive God who manipulates the natural world and human beings to bring dreadful pain and torment on his people because of their wrong-doing. Of course, the innocent are also punished alongside the guilty. The concept of God as “jealous”, and punishing infidelity down to the third and fourth generation is one that we modern Christians would like to leave behind us in the distant past, part of the early formulating faith, rather than something to deal with today. If you can not accept this vision of God, well, you have no option but to reject the linkage and move on and reject the idea that God does or perhaps even can manipulate the natural world at will.

If this all seems a little, say, part of an ancient world, having no place in modern thinking, well sadly contemporary examples are available. First, we saw it in the reaction of some Islamic authorities to the Tsunami in 2004 where it was stated that the failure to adhere strictly to the tenets and practise of Islam by the people of Aceh in Indonesia was the reason for the death and destruction they experienced. Secondly, we may cite the linkage which some extreme Christian groups would like to establish between HIV/AIDS and homosexuality, happening as a direct expression of God’s displeasure at human behaviour.



TSUNAMI!

In its original context, bowing down to false gods made of wood, stone or metal was a common way for people to try and make sense of their environment. As we read last month, people needed to understand how things worked and this moved them to imagine that behind the seasons and causing the rains to fall and the crops to grow, there was a force or god which could be influenced by human tributes, or worship. As Israel developed, these practises were denounced as apostasy and forbidden. Only worship of the true God of Israel was permitted, according to the traditions, in the Temple in Jerusalem or at appointed shrines.



Pieta by Michelangelo

The reaction to this commandment has led some to denounce all human representations in art and particularly in religious buildings. Synagogues and Mosques never have such artwork, relying on geometric patterns, designs, words of scripture and the like. On the other hand, Christian authorities were in the forefront of using the best artists to create images and statues in an effort to decorate their churches. This was partly as an expression of joyful celebration of faith but also to make the teaching of the faith easier to a largely illiterate community. The stories of the Saints and Martyrs as well as the teaching of the Bible were seen in stained glass, paintings and statuary. In 17th century England, the Puritans denounced images in churches and large numbers of pieces of art were destroyed in an attempt to cleanse the church of what they saw as the impurity of idols.

The Puritans denounced the use of images because of the second commandment. When they saw a Christian kneeling before a statue of the Virgin Mary, they thought that the Christian was worshipping the artist's handiwork, not God. There were also other theological issues about people being taught to pray to the Saints asking for them to intercede with God. For Protestant theologians, only Jesus could fulfil this role, and so getting rid of the statues met another theological need at one and the same time.

From our point of view today, if anyone actually cares about such matters anymore, the worshipping of idols is at least a waste of time. It provides false expectations and offers false hopes. Into this category could be placed such things as occult practises, consulting Zodiac star signs, palm readers, Tarot cards and ouija boards. Although to some they seem harmless enough, they undermine our self esteem by relying on the irrational and sheer chance. Life is not a lottery, but provides a series of decisions and choices which have their consequences.

Of course, we would not as Christians, wish to participate in any thing of this nature, and although we have statues and pictures in our Church, these are always and only there to enhance our love of God and inspire us to live as Christian disciples.



QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

The one major religion in which the worship of idols may be currently present is Hinduism. Hindu theology proposes that after appropriate prayers have been said, the statues in the Mandir become deities and require to be treated as deities because they have had the spirit of the godhead breathed into them. This is not the place to study Hindu theology, and I am not equipped to do so anyway, but my glimpses into the Mandirs always shock me. The reverence, the food offerings, the changing of clothes and washing of the deities is at first sight, so very strikingly different to western thinking and western theology. I can only just guess at the horror which these activities caused in our Christian ancestors who travelled to India in the 18th and 19th centuries and tried to persuade the people to change to Christianity. The contrast to Christianity, especially the Protestant forms of Christianity, are so great as to have created deep trauma in the mission fields.

Bishop Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta from 1823 until his sudden death in 1826, wrote these words...

“In vain with lavish kindness,
The gifts of God are strown,
The heathen in his blindness
Bows down to wood and stone.”

Admittedly, he wrote them from the comfort and safety of a post which he took up having married into a family of landed gentry in Wales before he ever visited India, and I often wonder if he changed his mind on encountering the real world of Hinduism. My guess is that most of the missionaries were so shocked that they didn't make very much effort to look for common ground, looking deeper into the mind of the Hindus. They went straight for conversion. I can't help feeling, deep down, that there is a common source for this reverence of the Mandir deities and our Christian reverence for the lives of the saints and Jesus himself. And the concept of consecration of bread, wine, artefacts for use in worship all appear to have a similar driving force.

Religions are not all the same and have different directions, but because they all arise from human issues and needs, we must be able to see things in common and work on these rather than close our eyes to them. Worshipping idols today means following those practices which diminish human fulfilment and break up human relationships. I mean things like pursuing weaponry and war-like options when negotiation is the really good option, greedy consumption which deprives others of essentials, divisive activities which create haves and have-nots, rubbishing the honest endeavours of other people, mocking the poetry and music of faiths, turning a blind eye to wrong-doing, being unconcerned with the lives of other people.

Perhaps in the end, idol worship is essentially self worship, or self-serving, the putting of selfish interests before all else.

In the end, faith is about values for living, both personal and public values. Idols are the things which detract from our commitment to share our journey of life with our brothers and sisters of humanity hoping to be enriched and enriching others as we go.