

October 11th 2026

Trinity 19

10.30am Holy Communion at Langham

Exodus 32.1-14, Philippians 4.1-9, Matthew 22.1-14

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

In last week's reading from the Old Testament, we heard about the giving of the Ten commandments. They were given to the wandering Israelites by God through Moses, to bring some order to their rebellious and fractured society as they moved through the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt, and prescribed, in ten very short statements, how they should relate to God and to each other. But they had a wider purpose – in that they were the means by which the Israelites would become the vehicle for delivering God's plan for the redemption of the world. That might not have been terribly apparent to those struggling with their nomadic existence, but the giving of the commandments was the first step on the way to making the Israelites a distinctive people, though whom God could work. And this was particularly reflected in the first two commandments.

I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other God's but me.

You shall not make for yourself any idol.

In the first, we have an echo of the divine name Yahweh, I am who I am, the source of all being, the God who existed before all things and will exist into eternity, not bound by time or space. The Israelites are told to worship this God, not the God's of the nations, the personifications of natural powers such as the thunder God's Baal, or the God's that they conceived as living within their man made idols, but the one who was, and is, and is to come. This was the fundamental thing that would make them into a distinctive people, the basis of all the commandments. The writer of Deuteronomy summarises this into words we know very well.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

But these commandments were given to a people who had long been in slavery, through a charismatic leader, Moses, who seems to have been the only one who could hold the quarrelsome tribes together. At the time of our reading they seem to have been very dependent upon him, rather than transferring that dependency to Yahweh. After the giving of the commandments, Moses came down from the mountain, selected some of the

elders in the community, and took them back up the mountain, where they all had an overwhelming vision of God.

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.

God then instructed Moses to stay on the mountain while the others were to return to their camp. And it is at that point that today's reading begins. Moses was away for a long time, and the people began to feel insecure – the one who was able to mediate between them and God was no longer around. So, just a few days or weeks after being instructed not to make for themselves any idol, they did just that. Aaron, Moses brother, who really should have known better, was instrumental in the casting of what was probably a wooden idol overlaid by gold, a representation of a calf, which was a fairly ubiquitous representation of God in that region at that time, and called on the people to worship that God. To give him his credit, he did try to represent this as an image of Yahweh in some way. He talked in almost the same breath of the gods who brought them out of the house of Egypt, and of a festival of the Lord, again a reflection of the divine name. He and the people tried to find their security in the familiar, the sort of religious practices they had been used to, albeit in violation of the newly given commandment not to make an idol, but to be distinct from their neighbours.

Up the mountain, all this, unsurprisingly, did not go down well, and however Moses was experiencing God, he sensed his displeasure and his coming wrath. But Moses we read

implored the Lord his God

and prayed earnestly for his people in all their disobedience

Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever."

And God, to put it in very human terms, relented. That wasn't the end of the story of course, and in the verses that follow we read of Moses return to the camp in anger, the breaking of the tablets on which the commandments were written and the destruction of the idol. Deeds have consequences.

So what are we to make of all this, 3000 or more years on from the events that we are reading about. Firstly, we need to remember that we, as the church of Christ, are, in biblical terms, the spiritual descendants of those wandering Israelites. The apostle Peter wrote

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

We are still God's people, the ones through whom he fulfils his purposes for the world. But we are like those Israelites to in other ways. We always have a tendency to put our security in something or someone else. On a trivial level, we can think of those who divert their lives and their worship to the seeking of material prosperity and satisfaction, maybe to a football team, or some other activity that rules their lives. But we also live in a society that seems to be dominated by systems beyond our control, systems that have been created by humanity that have become distorted and have taken on a spiritual life of their own. The apostle Paul would write

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Here he is thinking of things such as the international economic system, that reaches down into every part of our lives, bring security and material prosperity to some extent, but holding individuals and societies captive. Jesus called it mammon. Or the love of nation that can bind and unify, but that can so easily be twisted and distorted to exclude and alienate rather than to embrace others. These seem to be entities that take on a spiritual life of their own and demand our worship and compliance. It is very easy to make for ourselves such idols to worship and serve without fully realising what we are doing, even trying to represent them as true worship, just as Aaron tried to import the name of Yahweh into the worship of the Golden Calf. And here the lesson is clear. We are a royal priesthood, God's own people, and the worship of the great I am, should be at the centre of our lives. It should transcend all other activities and interests. We are still called to be distinctive from those around us, yet still to act as salt and light in our communities.

But there is another point. The Israelites at this stage in their development, were very dependent upon one man, Moses their leader, and seem to have expected him to be the one who mediated between them and God. And that of course has very modern echoes. Church communities can get to be very dependent upon their leaders – their pastors and ministers – to give them direction and purpose, rather than relying on God himself. And you will notice that at the moment we have a distinct shortages of what we might regard as leaders in the benefice, and I have to admit that at times, from my perspective at lease, we do seem a bit leaderless, a bit lost. We have nobody to intercede for us to God, to bring God's word to us. But here again we come down to Peter's words.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

In scriptural terms, priesthood is something that belongs to the whole community of the church, not for specific individuals. The priestly role is to offer sacrifice and to pray. This means that we are all called to

...be a living sacrifice, sent out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory....

What that sacrifice may be in terms of how we expend our time and our energy, for the sake of God's people, for the sake of His church, is for us each to discern and put into practice. And we are called too (and most importantly I think) to be the ones who take up the burden of prayer for the church and its members and for the needs of the world around us, to "implore" God on behalf of his people. From our epistle

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We have no Moses, no Rector, but in our God, the I am what I am we can know that, again to quote Paul

..... by the power at work within us is, he able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.....

So then perhaps two points from the reading – firstly we must remain vigilant about who and what we worship, and cast down the idols that we construct as soon as we realise what they are. And secondly, we all bore the responsibility for each other and for the future of our church, and that comes with a call to sacrificial service and to prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen