

## Brancepeth Sermon

4 March 2018 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Exodus 20:1–17; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25; John 2:13–22

*Open our ears, O Lord,  
to hear your word and know your voice.  
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,  
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

Let me start with the sermon I'm *not* going to preach.

I'm *not* going to preach the sermon in which I  
jump off from the passage in Exodus,  
and tell you all off for being *idolaters*.

I can see how it would work.

I'd start by trying to rouse your incredulity  
at the very idea that, instead of worshipping the true God,  
people might turn to gods made of stone or precious metals.

And then I'd try turning the tables –  
wagging my finger at you and asking,  
Well, what about *your* idols?  
Have you made an idol of your money,  
or of your family, or of your security, or of your nation,  
or of your politics, or of your morality, or of your church,  
or of your feelings, or –  
and this is obviously the most pernicious for some of us –  
of your iPhone?  
Have those things taken the central place in your life  
that only God should occupy?  
There's not necessarily anything wrong with that sermon.  
It could be a good sermon for Lent.  
I've no doubt someone else could preach it well,  
and make it work.  
But I'm afraid I found that my heart wasn't in it.  
And I think the reason that my heart wasn't in it was  
that it would be very easy to focus entirely on the negative –  
*what are you making into an idol?* –

and not enough on the positive:

what is it to have lives shaped by true worship,

lives truly centred on God?

And at its worst, it could have become a kind of guilt trip

about not doing enough churchy stuff:

You watch lots of television –

*why don't you spend as much time reading the Bible?*

You're happy to go round a National Trust property

with your grandchildren for hours on a Saturday –

*why aren't you willing to spend that many hours in*

*St Brandon's Church with your heavenly father on a Sunday?*

*That's* not a sermon I want to preach.

To avoid going down that road,

I think we need to understand what is *opposed* to idolatry –

what the good thing is that idolatry rejects,

or fails to grasp.

What is it that God, in our Exodus passage,  
is telling Moses to protect, when he condemns idolatry?

What is it that Paul is urging the Corinthians to value,  
when he tells them to reject the wisdom of the world?

What was it that Jesus wanted the temple to be,  
when he threw out the money-changers,  
overturned their tables, and spilled their coins?

Well, let's start with the Exodus passage.

How does God's message to Moses begin?

'I am the Lord your God,  
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,  
out of the house of slavery.'

The people he's addressing owe everything to God.

They have been rescued; they are free;  
they have been given new life as a people together.

Their life is a gift. *Everything* about their life is a gift.

The law they have been given –  
the beginning of the scriptures – that is a gift.

The tabernacle they have been given –  
the focus for their times of worship – that is a gift.  
Their *food* is a gift. Their *freedom* is a gift.  
Their chance to live together in *peace* is a gift.  
And if they spend time with their families –  
not having to worry about their male children  
being snatched from them,  
not having to watch their daughters enslaved –  
well *that* is a gift too.

It's *all* gift.

In that context, their turn to idolatry isn't about  
making some element of ordinary life too important.  
It's about turning away from the mysterious,  
the invisible,  
the untameable gift-giving God,  
the unseen source from whom *all* this good life comes,  
and turning instead to some god  
that can be more easily *seen*, more easily *grasped*,  
*more easily manipulated*.

It's about turning away from the unseen God  
who is the giver of all good gifts  
to a god you can *bargain with*, or trade with.

Put the right offerings in,  
to ensure the outcomes you were looking for.

Idolatry turns a relationship of gift and gratitude  
into a relationship of purchase and payment.

It turns a relationship of  
God's generous love for God's children  
into an episode of Bargain Hunt.

Instead of saying 'Thank you for *all* this!'

It says, 'How can we *control* this – how can we guarantee  
we'll keep on getting these good things?'

And it poisons things.

The good life that should be received as a gift  
is turned into a commodity –  
and that twists it and poisons it.

It turns the gift *sour*.

Now think of Jesus in the temple.

What is the temple?

It is the place, above all where Jesus' people, the Jews,  
gather to offer *thanks* to God.

Thanks to God for all God's good gifts.

It's a place of offerings –

‘All good things come from you,  
and of your own do we give you.’

And Jesus sees that it has been turned instead

into a place of trade –

a place where the value of your response to God  
gets calculated,

and the right amount gets paid out coin by coin,

and where that exchange gets in the way of the gratitude

that is meant to be expressed there.

It is meant to be a house of prayer, a house of thanksgiving –

not a counting house for the paying off debts.

And this is one part – only one part, but it is one part –  
of Paul's contrast in his letter to the church in Corinth.

The world's wisdom –

that's the *so-called* wisdom that only knows how to bargain,  
how to trade.

It knows what you have to pay to get what you want.

It knows what things cost – what *everything* costs.

God's way looks like foolishness by comparison.

Because God gives everything away.

God gives abundantly. God gives recklessly.

God gives foolishly.

**And so the very last thing you should do  
to respond to this God  
is start trying to work out which bit of your time,  
which bit of your energy, which bit of your attention,  
you owe to God –  
to make sure you give God his due,  
that you clear your debt.**

**The very last thing you should be doing is  
working out where exactly God comes  
on the list of things you value.**

*That* risks turning God into an idol –  
a bit of your life that can be kept in its place,  
even if it happens to be the place of honour.

No: *all* good things come from God –  
*every good thing in your life* –  
and they come from God freely;  
they come from God's uncalculating generosity.

And to live as worshippers of God, to live free from idolatry,  
to treat this world as a house of prayer  
rather than as a counting house –  
is, more than anything else,  
to live in gratitude to God for all of it.

To recognize it *all* as gift:  
your family, this community, the food on your table,  
this church, the peace we enjoy, the beauty of nature,

the scriptures, the sacraments,  
even the coffee and biscuits afterwards.

They are gifts.

They are, at the deepest level,  
free gifts of God's reckless bounty.

And it's *right* for us to delight in those things,  
to enjoy God's gifts – and to praise God for them.

And it's right to recognize, therefore,  
that they're not actually *ours*.

They're not, at the deepest level, things we've bought,  
things we've earned, things we've traded for and now *own*.

They're God's good gifts,  
and God doesn't give them to us so that we can  
hoard them and consume them,  
keep them from others and accumulate them.

God gives us good gifts to give away.

God gives us peace to give away.

God gives us joy to give away.

God gives us love to give away.

God gives us life to give away.

God is the great giver,

and God invites us to become givers too –

to join God in giving God's good gifts,

generously, recklessly, foolishly.

This is the power and God, the wisdom of God.

It's the life of God that Jesus lived out, all the way to death –

and then, because there's nothing that can put a halt

to God's generosity –

it's the life Jesus lived again beyond resurrection.

Nothing could stop him from going on giving.

So, yes, we must keep ourselves from idols.

We must keep ourselves from imagining, from worshipping

a God less generous, a God less reckless, a God less foolish.

And the opposite of idolatry –  
well, this doesn't feel like a very Lenten note  
on which to finish the sermon,  
but it's where I seem to have ended up –  
the opposite of idolatry is nothing other than  
a life of delighted gratitude and reckless generosity.

*God of all blessings*  
*giver of all good gifts*  
*giver of life, giver of love*  
*give us grateful hearts to acknowledge you*  
*and generous hands to*  
*spread your gifts widely in the world*  
*in the name of your Son,*  
*your great gift,*  
*Jesus Christ,*  
  
*Amen*