

SMASHING IDOLS

23rd July 2017

Reading: Judges 6:25-32

Idols are the biggest threat to our faith. They're everywhere, pervasive and oh-so subtle. Now in Fiji idols are much more in your face. After Christianity, Hinduism is the most common religion. So last week when driving from Nadi to Lautoka, 30 minutes, we saw a number of red flags in some of the roadside houses. Each flag represents a Hindu shrine with idols. One school we visited was a Hindu school. Instead of a chapel like at Catholic and Presbyterian New Zealand school's this school had a Hindu temple, with idols. At church an elder led a Bible study on Isaiah 46 and about how pathetic it was that idols had to be carried about. He referenced his earlier Hindu life where idols like Ganesh need to be carried down to the sea as part of an annual ritual and how foolish this is in light of the Living God we worship.



Yet in secular New Zealand we are not immune. Idols are just as pervasive but not so obvious. For anything that displaces Jesus from being central, most important in our lives - is an idol. Our children can be idols when they become more important than Christ. Instead of looking to Jesus for our identity we look to them. Jesus is relegated to one more way to keep our children healthy, safe and happy. Yes, children can be idols. Our bank balance can be an idol, where Jesus is just one more way of keeping our finances well in the black. Even tithing is seen as a shred investment more than a generous response to God's great love. Success can be an idol where going to church, prayer and our "model" faith is just one more way we tick the success box while our relationship with Jesus grows cold.

So it's no surprise the Bible spends time addressing idols - including this morning's passage in Judges. This morning Gideon's story will show God takes idols serious, that idols fight back when threatened and how idols are defeated. We'll also see how Gideon's smashing idols points to Jesus and his work on the cross.

Prayer

This morning we're back to Gideon's story. When Josh was commissioned a few weeks back we saw how Gideon was also set apart for God's work. Then we met Gideon threshing grain in a wine press. Why in a wine press? Out of fear of the Midianites. Hardly the actions of a mighty and brave warrior fully called to rescue Israel. So everyone, including Gideon, was surprised when the angel greeted him with, "The Lord is with you mighty warrior". "Who me? You must have the wrong

guy". Eventually Gideon, most reluctantly, accepts the angel's words. Now he's ready for his first task, which surely is to gather an army and defeat the Midianites. Let's pick up the story in Judges 6:25

That same night the Lord said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering." So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him. Judges 6:25-27a

What's happening here? There's no mobilising troops or call to battle - just some late night shenanigans. Well the first thing we learn from this passage is...

I. God Takes Idols Seriously

You see, if you or I were in charge as soon as Gideon was chosen we'd have called a war council. Surely, this is the common sense approach. We'd send messages to key leaders throughout Israel, rally the troops and, with God's help, defeat the Midianites. But we're not in charge and our common sense is not always God's sense. For at its core Israel's problem wasn't the Midianites but worshiping idols. Instead of God only and forever first they'd pushed God out of the picture and worshiped Baal. Who's Baal? Baal was the strongest of Canaanite gods in control of weather, rain and storm. A bit like the Greek god' Zeus. Asherah was the goddess of fertility so for an agricultural economy it made sense to worship the gods controlling weather and fertility. However, this was clearly forbidden by God.

Early in chapter six God sent a prophet who declared on God's behalf...

I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me." Judges 6:10

This is why the Midianites were able to oppress Israel. Not because they were militarily stronger or more astute, but because Israel worshiped other gods. They'd broken the first two commandments of the ten.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. Exodus 20:3-4

That God sent the Midianites as a wakeup call in the first place and now won't rescue Israel until idols are dealt with underlines how seriously God takes idols. Its the same today. Whether our idols are positive like our children, bank balance or success. Or negative like an alcohol, porn or gambling - God will not have us push Christ to the side or out of lives. He will not share his glory with another but will smash idols in our lives. But watch out for when threatened idols push back - they push back hard. For picking up the story in verse 27...

II. Idols Fight Back

So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.

In the morning when the men of the town got up, there was Baal's altar, demolished, with the Asherah pole beside it cut down and the second bull sacrificed on the newly built altar!

They asked each other, "Who did this?"

When they carefully investigated, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it."

The men of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it." Judges 6:27–30.

This is why Gideon destroyed the idols at night Why? Because he knew there'd be trouble. And he was right. The town's people woke up the next morning furious their idols were destroyed. "Who did this? Surely they'll pay dearly". Notice Gideon doesn't boldly walk up and declare, "It was me. I did it for God's glory. Do your worst!" No. He's keeping quiet - very quiet. However having ten men help him in the night means he can't hide. At least one of the ten does him in. And the townsfolk demand his death. Why? Because idols fight back when threatened. They never go quietly.

And this is a helpful way for us to know when an idol's gripped our hearts. If our bank balance suffers a reversal and it's not an idol then we're naturally concerned, upset and may even worry about how to turn it around. However if our bank balance is an idol this threat will cause an overreaction as the idol tightens its grip. We panic, we feel our world is crumbling around us, we become desperate and may even do crazy things. We sign up to the next get rich scheme, we strong arm or smooth talk relatives out of money, we steal from work promising ourselves we'll pay it back. And we're so good at justifying all this we don't even know we're overreacting - but others certainly do. Idols hate been smashed and they fight back. If you've struggled with porn and tried to give up - you know what I'm talking about. If you recognise your children are an idol and you say to yourself, "no more" - yet next time they're seriously ill or slighted by friends - look out. The over reaction is back.

And all this raises the question, "How I rid myself of idols?" If the easiest way to identify them is by our overreaction when they're threatened and by the observations of people close to us how do we get rid of them? How do we protect ourselves? How do we defeat idols?

III. How Idols Are Defeated

Well, the answer is found at the beginning of this passage. God asked Gideon to do two things. Firstly smash the idols of Baal and Asherah and secondly - and this is key - to build an altar to God and worship him. This is how we defeat idols. By worshipping Christ. By allowing him, asking him, pleading with him to capture the affections of our heart so we might know the joy of worshipping him. Not mechanically, out of duty but with all our heart and with delight.

Let me come at this from another angle with a story from Martin Luther. Now 2017 marks 500 years since Martin Luther started the reformation that saw the birth of Protestant churches that we as Presbyterians belong to. And one of the issues of his day was the number of Christians having shrines in their homes, especially to Mary. They would pray to Mary and icons and the like, instead of directly to Christ. Now some of Luther's students stormed into peoples' homes and smashed these shrines thinking they were doing a good thing - a bit like Gideon. But Luther said no. For he recognised even if you were to drag these people out by their hair they would just turn back to an idol. Instead he said...

"I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip [Melanchthon] and my Amsdorf [Nicholaus von], the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all."

I love this quote from Luther as it gives a great definition of a minister. A minister is someone who drinks beer with friends and takes naps! Joking aside this is how Luther defeated the idols of his day.

He preached God's Word in church. He taught God's Word to his students. He translated God's Word into the common language printing it on the newly invented printing press. Because of this, he didn't have to smash literal idols of his day but God's Word did its work. It caused people to repent, turn from idols and turn to Christ and worship him - alone. This is how we smash the idols of our day. By God's Word and Worship.

But back to the story. What of Gideon? How did he get on? Because God takes idols seriously he smashed the idols Baal and Asherah. He'd built an altar and worshiped God but now the idols were fighting back. So much so, Gideon now stands before an angry mob demanding his death. Let's pick up the story in verse 31

But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar." So that day they called Gideon "Jerub-Baal," saying, "Let Baal contend with him," because he broke down Baal's altar. Judges 6:31-32

Gideon's father stood up for him. He didn't have to. Gideon killed his prize bull - think of a son writing off a late model car for a modern day equivalent of the cost. His father had built the altars earning honour from the townsfolk yet his son smashed them up. His father also ran the risk of the mob turning on him. But no, Joash to his credit, stood up for his son.

And this reminds me of another son standing before an angry mob. And this angry mob yelled out, "Crucify him, crucify, him crucify him now!" Why? Because this true and better Son was sent by his Father to smash the idols in peoples lives. And though many were set free and rejoiced, the idols pushed back, demanding his death. For instead of this true and better Son being worshiped as God's Son they preferred another. John 19:15 records these words...

But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!"

"Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked.

"We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. John 19:15

Yet unlike Gideon, Jesus' Father was silent. Not a word from his Father, as Jesus was scourged. Not a word from his Father as the nails were driven in. Not a word from his Father as his beloved cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me". For this was the ultimate price Jesus paid to defeat sin and death and to smash the idols in our lives.

Listen. Our hearts are idol factories. And these idols are subtle and deceptive and beguiling. But God will not share his glory with another. This morning we've seen how seriously God takes idols. For, Gideon's first act in rescuing God's people was to smash idols not march into battle. Then we saw how idols fight back. Demanding the death of Gideon was a major overreaction to being threatened. And in this we are reminded we too overreact when our idols are threaten. And finally we saw how we defeat idols. Through God's Word and worship. Allow God's Word to sink into your lives - read it, study it, memorise it, pray it - and also worship. Worship Jesus. Ask him to so captivate the affections of your heart that you'll be lost in the wonder and beauty of Jesus - our Lord, Saviour, Master and Friend. Amen.