
Morality & Idolatry

a sermon by Dick Wolff following the 500th edition of Radio 4's
'The Moral Maze'

February 22nd 2009, Collinwood Road URC

Readings : Exodus 20 : 1 - 17 (*the 10 Commandments*)

Romans ch.7

I know there are a few Radio 4 listeners in the church. Radio 4 broadcasts a programme called 'The Moral Maze' in which panellists call in witnesses to try to tease out difficult moral questions. I usually find it a very frustrating listen because somehow they never manage to get to the heart of the matter. This week's edition was the 500th and they ran a special, in which they tried to address the question that lies at the very heart of the programme : 'where do we get our morality from in the first place?' Does it ultimately come from religion, or if not, from where? I listened with more hope than usual, but the programme remained true to form, and managed never really to get close to the middle of the maze.

gods and God

The first thing that stopped it being a useful discussion was the failure of all the participants except perhaps one to distinguish between 'God' and 'the gods'. The latter are 'projections' : they can be portrayed. Many (including four of the participants) argue that all gods are human inventions. But the God of the Bible – the God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims – is *beyond* imagination.

To worship something we can imagine (*i.e.* have an image of in our minds) is idolatry. It is a perpetual struggle to convince people that we are trying very hard *not* to worship a God whom we have imagined, and so often we are anyway. It's almost impossible *not* to.

Much religion is unwittingly idolatrous, too. It's virtually impossible to prevent ourselves filling in the 'imaginative hole'. But our religious roots are in Calvinism and something that was very important within Calvinism was the desire to strip away the 'religion' from Christianity (in a way) and 'let God be God' without religious clutter getting in the way. (In case we end up worshipping the stained glass window rather than the glorious mountain peak that can be glimpsed beyond it). In fact our

former General Secretary David Cornick wrote a book on Reformed spirituality entitled *Letting God be God*.

We are called to preach ‘God’ and call people to worship God. But so often we end up preaching *our image* of God – we end up preaching religion and religious culture. We say that God can only be viewed through our ‘stained glass window’. Isn’t *that* something we’ve learnt through our colonial history?

God, gods, and *religion*

The second reason why the programme failed was that despite the protests of all four witnesses, the regular panellists and the chairman himself all failed to distinguish between God and religion.

Religion is man-made – it is a *human response* to God or to ‘the gods’. It’s not just about the worship of God (capital G). Religion is about ‘worship’, and ‘worship’ doesn’t just mean conventional religious ceremony : it means ‘giving great value to’ (we address the Lord Mayor as “your worship”).

Can you think of some examples of secular religion (that is, religious behaviour outside organised so-called religion)?

‘Not this’ and ‘not that’ : recognising idolatry

One way of cutting through the confusion between God, ‘the gods’ and religion is to concentrate on what we *shouldn’t* worship, effectively saying ‘God is not *this* (so don’t do this) and not *that* (so don’t do that)’. This can be seen as negative but can also be liberating. (Parallel with Sunday observance in the old days which was all about not doing *anything*, including having fun? Also ‘giving things up for Lent’, which starts on Tuesday.) But somebody whose imagination has been taken hostage by ‘money and the need to buy things’, say, or ‘sex ’n drugs ’n rock ’n roll’ could find great liberation.

Going back to our examples of ‘idolatry’ : if we’re going to go out of our way to *avoid* worshipping things that are less than God we need to be able to recognise that that is what we’re

doing. We need to be able to spot ‘idolatry’ going on – because it certainly isn’t as easy as looking out for people prostrating themselves in front of carved idols. It can be about giving too great a weight to any human idea.

Can you think how it is we might *realise* that ‘idolatry’ has crept up on us? What might we look for?

- l ‘Religious’ or ritual behaviour? Football match, maybe? Big festival?
- l Statements such as ‘I *have* to do such-and-such . . .’ (as if we’re not free)? (“We *have* to be paid these enormous bonuses because that’s the ‘going rate’.” “I *need* (not ‘I’d like’) another drink” – how often do we find ourselves saying “I need . . .” when what we really mean is “I’d like”?)
- l The suggestion that people who don’t do this, or believe this, or feel that, are somehow ‘outsiders’? Some examples : travellers (who aren’t sold on the myth of land ownership), people of ‘other faiths’ . . . like zealous and intolerant faith in the ‘free market’ for instance.

Idolatry creates victims

But one sure-fire sign of idolatry lurking in the background is *when people are becoming victims*. Not victims to natural disaster, or victims of bad luck, but victims sacrificed to some invisible principle. Victims of sexual abuse, political prisoners (like those at Guantanamo Bay perhaps), victims of anorexia, victims of economic recession, victims of male domination and so on. When you see victims, you should ask “what is the idol being worshipped here?”

Can you see where this is going?

When we see Jesus on the cross, we can rightly ask “What idol is being worshipped here to cause this?”

The horrible distortion of much Christian religion, and unfortunately a growing part of Christian religion, says that it is God (capital G) that requires this sacrifice. But I suggest that any

god that requires such a terrible sacrifice cannot be the God Jesus worshipped. Those of us who think, as I do, that the belief that God demanded appeasement through the blood of his Son is a dangerous distortion of the Christian gospel are going to have to hold our nerve in the coming decades because we are going to be told by large numbers of our fellow Christians that we have lost the plot, gone wet. But I am clear in my own mind, and I will hold this line : *any* god that demands human sacrifice is an idol.

So what 'idol' demanded the life of Jesus?

Paul gave part of the answer, and in the Book of Acts this revelation is described as the scales falling from his eyes : it was 'sin' that demanded this sacrifice. 'Sin'? What is 'sin'? Nobody talks about sin any more, do they?

Well, we're right to be very cautious when we talk about sin, because Paul himself is. He seems to see sin as some mysterious gremlin that gets into the works and corrupts even good things. It isn't a single thing you can point to or describe. Many people in the Church and outside the Church, when they think of 'sin', think of lists of things you mustn't do. 'Thou shalt not' this and that. "That's a sin". Immoral acts.

But Paul's whole point, which it seems most people (including most Christians) don't seem to realise is that *it's lists of 'things you mustn't do' that are – indirectly – the problem*. It is moral codes, religious principles, laws, that demanded the sacrifice of Jesus. Oh, the rules and laws weren't originally bad but this mysterious corruption had crept into the system and they had become an idol which demanded a sacrifice. Morality, if you like, had *itself* become the problem – because people thought that God (the true God, that is) demanded religion and morality; they took their eyes off God (or rather, they stopped really searching for God) and settled for what they could see and touch and smell – religion and morality. The 'stained glass window'. How could it happen? Something set up to keep us

faithful to God, anchored in the Truth, ended up crucifying God's Son?

Well, it did. And that's what *all* religion does when it stops thinking, becomes lazy, and becomes an end in itself. And I'm talking not just about Christian religion, or Muslim religion – I'm talking about the religion of free market consumerism, or the religion of 'national security', or the religion of 'sex, drugs and rock 'n roll', too.

So no wonder 'The Moral Maze' ended up getting nowhere. They were trying to find the source of morality in religion, not in God. They weren't asking about what *God* is like. Any morality or religion that doesn't really humble itself before the holy and mysterious God is dangerous. And any religion that thinks it knows the mind of the most holy God is doubly dangerous.

Whoa! What are we here for, then, if we don't claim to know the mind of God? Surely, that's what churches are *for* . . . to speak to the world in God's name? A lot of people *want* the Church to give a clear line – to be authoritative.

But the Church has to be very, very cautious before it starts saying 'thus says the Lord' because when we play with religion we are playing with fire.

As I've said : one thing our United Reformed Church in particular can be very hot on because of our Calvinist background is spotting false religion – idolatry. That's why our buildings are plain and simple, without images or consecrated buildings that people might end up worshipping; why we don't have priests that aren't accountable and can't be challenged and questioned, why we don't pin ourselves to creeds and statements of belief, why we're cautious about giving too much attention to religious experience and so on. Mind you, we have our own idolatrous tendencies too. We're always in danger of letting too many words get in the way of God. The Bible (we say) is our 'supreme authority' but if we're not careful we end up turning the *text* of the Bible itself into an idol : human ideas to be worshipped – instead of listening for the God who is (as it were) on the other side of that text.

That is called ‘fundamentalism’. Because it’s very religious, it makes the mistake of thinking it’s grounded in God (capital G).

It’s as if we are saying “God is *not* this, *not* that, not the other.” This process of clearing away the clutter and ‘letting God be God’ can come over as austere, a bit dry and empty. When you clear everything away it can seem as if there’s nothing there. Isn’t that what Jesus felt in Gethsemane?

Maybe we would do better to do what the Quakers do and sit together for an hour in silence; and not have preachers and not celebrate communion.

Well, maybe. But we believe that amongst all the ‘God is not this, not that’ there are a couple of positive clues God has left us, which will not only free us from our delusions and false religion, but give us a *positive* spirit, a forward motivation, a ‘lively hope’.

The Jesus whose death revealed how morality based on a religion that worships the one true God itself can turn sour and make a victim of its own God was no mere victim. Throughout his ministry he had revealed the heart of the mysterious God that is beyond all religion and morality, and what we have recorded tells of healing, forgiveness and new starts, new creation, freedom, reconciliation – each one of those a sermon in itself.

But there’s more. The Jesus whom religion and morality killed was raised. Some may say that this was an imagined resurrection – wishful thinking turned into a certain belief. But the story as told in the gospels makes clear not only that it was the last thing the disciples were expecting, but that it wasn’t even something they had been wishing for. They were terrified when it happened, because it confirmed the dreadful truth – this truly was ‘God’s Son’ whom they had failed.

But with the resurrection came hope – not a sort of narrow and self-centred hope that “Oh, goody, I’m going to live forever” but the hope that comes from knowing that whatever tomb we bury God in – whatever false worship of things that are less

than God, and whatever rubble that results when its temple of false worship eventually comes crashing down – God’s Spirit is there to restore and rebuild.