**Faithful God & faithless Israel seen in Psalm 106**

**The Golden Calf Ps. 106: 19-23, Ex. 32: 1-4+30-35 & 2 Cor. 6: 16-18**

This Lent-a time for self examination and commitment-we have explored the faults or lessons to be learnt from various episodes in Israel’s journey from Egypt to the Promised Land as seen in Ps. 106. The Lord has been faithful in his moulding of faithless Israel-His “treasured possession” Ex. 19: 5, who would act as His “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” to intercede for others and to show his character of goodness, love and uprightness. The Golden Calf representing the sin of idolatry is today’s example of faithless Israel.

You may know it was said of a stereotypical Frenchman, who married an English wife, that he had come out of France, but France had not come out of him-as he smoked Gauloise fags, loved garlic and lived to eat rather then ate to live! The same could be said of the Hebrews, when they left Egypt behind but not its culture. The brief summary of the incident in Ps. 106:19-23 highlights the shocking nature of their return to idolatry-this terrible affront to the Lord. They returned to type by setting up a physical symbol of the Calf that they claimed had rescued them from Egypt! Moses had only been absent for six weeks while he received the tablets of the Ten Commandments and further details of how to worship the Lord and live for Him Ex. 24: 13-14. Ps. 106: 19-23 outlines three causes behind their idolatry-their affront to the Lord, the true nature of idolatry and its consequences, the worst of which-their destruction-was avoided by Moses standing in the breach, offering to be blotted out as atonement for their sin Ex. 32: 32.

1. Their affront to the Lord sprang from their breathtaking forgetfulness and ingratitude Ps. 106: 21. Firstly, He had, in general terms, saved or delivered them from slavery in Egypt so unlikely an outcome, given Pharaoh’s military strength and obstinacy. As He told Moses “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt…heard their crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. “ Ex. 3: 7. He would release them from their hard bondage.

Secondly, He “did great things in Egypt…the miracles” Ps. 106: 21-22 to force Pharaoh to release them. Some of the early plagues the magicians could replicate, but after the gnats they gave up saying “This is the finger of God” Ex. 8: 19. There were miracles in that the later plagues like the hail did not affect the Hebrews in Goschen. This culminated in the destruction of the first born of man and beast for the Egyptians, whereas the Lord passed over the Hebrew hoes.

Thirdly, there were “the awesome deeds” Ps. 106: 22, when the Red Sea was parted, so that the Hebrews escaped unlike Pharaoh’s army and the Lord led them by a pillar of cloud or fire into Sinai towards their ultimate destination in Canaan.

All this work of the Lord done through Moses they had seen and experienced. Only a short while later, they had seen the smoke, heard the trumpet and felt the earthquakes, when the Lord met Moses on Sinai’s summit to give the Ten Commandments and other instructions on how to live for Him, besides the command “ Do not make any gods to be alongside Me.” Ex. 20: 22. All this they forgot and ignored-their ingratitude was breathtakingly callous-a kick in the teeth for their Lord.

2. The true nature of idolatry involves the substitution of someone or something else in the place of the Lord as the bringer of good things for the worshipper. It is easy to see the appeal in ancient times of nature gods as controlling the weather, crops and events, but remember idols (different though just as seductive) still face us nowadays. The Hebrews insisted “Come make us gods who will go before us, as for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.” Ex. 32: 1. If their rejection of Moses was heartless, it was catastrophic to spurn the divine hand that helped them, saying, after casting the idol, “these are your gods, oh Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” Ex. 32: 4. It was widely believed, at the time, in Egypt and Canaan that a Bull Calf was a symbol of fertility and strength and was to be worshipped to ensure prosperity. It persisted into the days of Jereboam, who set up bull idols in Dan and Bethel to divert the ten northern tribes from worshipping the Lord in Jerusalem. 2 Kgs. 12: 28. This long lived and powerful superstition was lurking in the backs of the Hebrews’ minds just like the delicious foods of Egypt they hankered after instead of dreary ‘samey’ manna! It fought against the Lord’s insistence that He was the one Lord who could not be seen and yet must be worshipped in purity. Even Aaron found this superstition impossible to resist, as his actions in Ex. 32: 2 & 22 suggest.

Tellingly, “they exchanged their Glory (God’s presence with them) for an image of a bull which eats grass.” Ps. 106: 20. They thought an image more powerful than the Lord in all His glory, magnificence, love and faithfulness, who had committed himself to them. Could anything be more ungrateful, thoughtless and wicked?

The particulars of the idols THEN are symbols of whatever we prefer to trust in NOW for our well being. As 2 Cor. 6: 14 & 16 make clear “What do righteousness (right relationship with God) and wickedness (sinfully ignoring Him) have in common?...What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?... As God has said ‘I will live with them…be their God …they will be My people.’” All this was totally forgotten and rejected.

3. The consequences of idolatry. Firstly, the celebrations and worship of the Golden Calf quickly turned into wild excess and immorality of all sorts, which was par for the course in all pagan worship. The Lord’s will was that worship should be joyous, serious and moral.

Secondly, the Lord could not tolerate such behaviour and ingratitude, as Moses knew, when he broke the tablets just received. He ground up the image, mixed it with water and made the people drink it. Ex. 32: 19-20. He, next, destroyed some of the ringleaders. The Lord was preparing to destroy them all,. Ex. 32: 10, but Moses stood in the breach to take the punishment instead of all the people Ps. 106: 23. Later, plague destroyed many of them Ex. 32: 35, but, for the moment, the Lord withdrew from them, letting his angel lead them and Moses had to meet Him outside the Camp, where the Lord spoke to Moses “face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” Ex. 33: 11. Furthermore in His amazing love and graciousness the Lord gave Moses a glimpse of his glory and character Ex. 34: 6-7,and renewed the covenant or agreement with them after Moses’ confession of sin on their behalf. Ex. 34: 8-10. The Hebrews were restored as his people with their destiny in the Promised Land.

What does this all mean for us?

If we forget all his good gifts, benefits and salvation, we are spurning His faithfulness and love. We are little better than the Hebrews who demanded a Golden Calf to worship. We can so easily forget His goodness and place our trust for our well being in our own cleverness, success, money, status or wide circle of friends. We can almost worship these rather than the Lord. These bogus deliverers can creep in so quietly from an unbelieving world into our thinking. To allow this to happen is to affront the Lord. Grateful thanks and worship are the best remedies.

The immediate consequences of the Hebrews’ idolatry included the curtailment of the link with the Lord-the distance between the camp and Moses’ tent, where he met the Lord-the Lord’s presence somewhat withdrawn. We, probably, know this, when we have not confessed that we have strayed from His ways and been unkind to another, for example. The good news, however, is that the Lord in His mercy was ready to forgive them. Moses action in “standing in the breach”, when he pleaded with the Lord to forgive the Hebrews, even at the cost of his own life Ex. 32: 11-13 & 33, reminds us of the Lord Jesus Christ standing in the breach to deliver us from the penalty of our sins, so that God might forgive us. The covenant or agreement was restored between the Hebrews and the Lord. So that they would still be “His treasured possession”-they would be “His people and He would be their God.” This can be as true for us as for them. How could we or they worship anyone or anything else?