

Dear Friends,

Exodus 32: 1-6

Up above Moses is with God. He has been on the mountain receiving God's teaching for forty days. God has given him the two tablets of stone. On these stones God's own finger has written the commandments. They are very precious. No harm must come to them. Up above, here on this mountain, it's a place of quiet and calm, peace and tranquillity, it's a place of bliss.

Down below there's a very different story. The people are growing restless and impatient. Moses has been away for so long. They do not know what's happened to him. They think perhaps he will not be coming back. And without him, what's going to happen to them? He's been their leader and they do so like to have a leader. And he's also been the one who has helped them to be aware of God. If he's gone, maybe they've not only lost their leader, they've also lost God. They are feeling uncertain and anxious. They want someone or something to make them feel safe again.

They gather around Aaron, Moses brother. The Hebrew word that we translate "Gathered around" is a word which is used when troops line up for war. It will be used again later when some of the people are rebelling against Moses. There's revolution in the air. Aaron is feeling intimidated by the anger and rage that surrounds him. They make their demand "Make us gods who shall go before us". They want a new leader who will show them where to go and give them some security about their future. They also want someone to go before them in battle and fight for them.

Forty days ago, they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient". Already they are falling away from that. God has liberated them from slavery; seen them safely through the sea; fed them with bread from heaven; given them water from the rock; and most recently given them the teaching which, if put into practice, will make of their land a promised land. God's been good to them. But they have decided to turn their backs on God. It happens. It's very easy to lose your faith.

I have some sympathy with Aaron. He does not come out of this story well but the way that he acts does not surprise me. He is certainly being put under pressure. You could describe it as being bullied. He also wants to help the people. He understands them. He is going through what they are going through. Maybe Moses, up the mountain with God, does not really grasp, as Aaron does, what it's really like for the people down below.

Aaron says, "Bring all your gold rings to me". Is that intended to make them think twice? Does he want them to realise that giving up their gold to get a god is not worth the sacrifice? If Aaron does have that intention, it does not work. They willingly give up their gold. If Aaron was bluffing, his bluff is called. Now he has to

make a god. He does this deliberately and carefully. He fashions it with an engraving tool, forms it in a mould and casts it in the image of a calf.

The commandments begin with the proclamation that God brought the people out of the land of Egypt. But when the people see the calf they declare, "These are your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt". When Aaron sees this, he builds an altar before the calf. He says, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord". The word Lord, is the word for the God of Israel. Aaron seems to be trying to hold on to faith in God. He may even be calling the festival for the next day in the hope that it will give time for Moses to come back and sort everything out.

But on the next day there is still no sign of Moses. So, the people get up early, bring sacrifices and make offerings. They sit down to eat and drink and they rise up to play. The word "play" does not have to refer to something that is bad. Its basic meaning is to laugh which can be a scornful laugh or alternatively it might be a cheerful, pleasurable laugh. So, sometimes it's used to describe mockery, at other times it's used to describe people being merry with each other, on occasions the playfulness being described is sexual. The word is used in the book of Genesis when Isaac and Rebecca are seen playing with each other, that is they are spotted in a happy lover's embrace. The word "play" is clearly open to interpretation, what might it mean in our story? Later the behaviour of the Israelites will be described as them "running wild". My hunch is that it is their sexual playfulness getting out of control. That however should not be our focus. The problem is that they have turned away from God and chosen to give themselves to something else, that's how they have left the right path, that's what will lead to them destroying themselves.

So, while up above Moses is enjoying a blissful calm with God, down below, there has been restlessness and impatience which have led to anger and bullying, and now there is frenzy and fevered activity. Word of what's happening down below is about to reach those up above. How will God react? What plan will God put together in response to their behaviour?

God bless you,

Tony