

Dear Friends,

Exodus 32: 7-14

Down below the people have turned away from God and are worshipping a statue of a calf which Aaron made out of gold. Up above, on the mountain, Moses is with God. Perhaps Moses wants to stay in that blissful experience. But unexpectedly God tells him that it's time to break up the party. God says, "Quick, go down, for your people that I brought up from Egypt have acted ruinously". Notice God calls them not "my" but "Your people". God is no longer saying to them "You belong to me". Moses hears what God says but cannot find any words of his own in response. Perhaps he's still in a bit of a daze from being with God, or maybe he's so amazed by what he hears that he's shocked into silence. God speaks again with some chilling words, "Now leave me alone that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume and make an end of them; and of you I will make a great nation". Is this what God is like? Is God quick to give up on people when they make a mess of things? Is God always ready to bring them to destruction? Is God testing Moses and trying to see how much Moses understands about what God is like?

Moses could be flattered by God's suggestion of starting a new nation from his descendants. God would then no longer be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but instead the God of Moses. Whether he's feeling flattered or not it certainly might be safer for Moses to do as he's been told and make himself scarce while God is in this kind of mood. But he doesn't. He stays and he makes a stand for the people. He says "You, God, brought the people out of Egypt. Do you want the Egyptians to be able to say that you had evil intentions and were determined all along to destroy them and wipe them from the face of the earth?" Moses is asking God to think about God's reputation, about what others will say about God. Moses pleads, "Turn from your fierce wrath; repent and do not bring disaster on your people". Moses goes on to remind God of the promise that was made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give them many descendants and make of them a great nation. To destroy the people would be for God to break a promise. Commitments and promises should be kept. When we sign up to agreements, we should honour the terms of those agreements. It's harder to trust and respect those who don't. God hears Moses arguments and repents. God's mind is changed about the disaster that was being planned.

It does feel as though roles are reversed somewhat in this story. You might expect to see Moses flaring up in anger and planning to take revenge on an unfaithful people, while God is the voice of reason calming him down. In this story it's the other way around. Is it, as I suggested a test for Moses? Is it the story-tellers grappling with their own understanding of God, trying to work out what God is like? Does it reflect something that we find in ourselves, that desire for revenge or to see harsh punishment being handed out to those who we feel deserve it?

What certainly comes across is the seriousness of wrong doing and the need for committed prayer. How we live matters. When we go off the rails it causes hurt and harm. It's important to find ways of expressing the truth that God stands for

right against wrong, for good against evil. God's strong line in this story is one way of saying that. And Moses gives us the picture of someone who prays to and intercedes with God. He offers committed and persistent prayer. In the book of Deuteronomy, we hear Moses own description of what happened. Moses says that he threw himself prostrate before God for forty days and forty nights. The picture I get is of Moses earnestly wrestling in prayer. I wonder what changes might happen if we were a little more committed to the life of prayer. We all pray in different ways. You don't have to pray like Moses. You just have to pray like ... (insert your own name here). But God is always calling us to expand our prayer, to let it go deeper. I wonder how you can respond to that call.

Moses has been up above with God. He has been thinking "How good it is to be here". But now the moment has come to go back down below. He takes the tablets of stone and turns and heads for the camp. He begins to hear the sound of the people. What he hears fills him with horror.

God bless you,

Tony