

Dear Friends,

Exodus 32: 15-35

Moses is on his way from up-above to down-below. He is carrying the two tablets of stone on which the commandments are written. He passes Joshua who he'd left part of the way up the mountain. Joshua has heard the noise from the camp and being a military sort, thinks it's the sound of battle. Moses assures him that it's not fighting that he can hear.

What Moses finds in the camp makes him furious. When he was up the mountain Moses said to God, "Why does your wrath burn hot against the people?" He tried to stop God from being angry. Now, however he can see what's happening with his own eyes. He sees the calf and the people dancing and it makes him angry, his wrath flares hot. He takes the precious tablets of stone and he throws them to the ground. As the people have broken the commandments, so the stones bearing the commandments are now also broken. When an agreement was inscribed on stone, smashing the stone was a legal way of ending the agreement. It looks as though the covenant between God and the people has come to an end. They have not kept their promise. They have not held up their side of the deal.

Moses takes the calf, burns it, grinds it to dust, scatters the dust on water and makes the people drink it. Then he turns his attention to Aaron and asks him to give an account of what happened. Aaron takes no responsibility. He says, "Don't be angry with me. Don't blame me". He is quick to point his finger at others. "It's the people", he says, "They are bent on evil". He describes what happened. His picture is fairly accurate, but he hides how carefully he crafted the calf. He claims to have just thrown some gold in a fire and heh presto out came a calf.

Moses then gathers some people from his own tribe and he sends them through the camp on a killing spree. About three thousand people are massacred. To God, Moses defended the people, but he shows no mercy. God in the story did not ask Moses to do this, but neither does God in the story challenge him for having done it. Can you imagine the God who you know through Jesus calling for this kind of action? Once again, we are reminded that wrong doing is serious. It's a matter of life and death. We must do what is right in order to stamp it out. But surely not all this killing. Doesn't that just make things worse? And wasn't there something about it in one of the commandments?

On the next day Moses speaks to the people. He confronts them with what they have done "You have sinned a great sin" he says, "But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin". Moses suggests that "perhaps" God will be forgiving. He gives the people the hope that this may be so.

Moses climbs the mountain again. Down-below he stands for God, calling the people to be faithful to God, firm in his resolution against wrong doing. Up-above, before God, he stands for the people, defending them, appealing to God to act for their good.

Moses confesses that the offence of the people has been great, but he begs God to forgive them. And if God won't and carries on with his intention of wiping them out, then Moses wants to be blotted out of the book God has written alongside of them. God had offered to start again and build a new nation from the descendants of Moses. But Moses does not give his consent to this. He says, "If you are destroying the people, then destroy me as well". He is offering himself to try to save the people. Aaron did not take any responsibility. He said "Don't be angry with me. Don't blame me". Moses is prepared to share in the blame with the people. He is willing to accept his share of the anger that they deserve.

Moses gets the answer he wants. God will not destroy the people. There is a time for punishment but it is justly given, Moses will not be removed from God's book. Some punishment is given. The people go through a time of plague. But then the journey continues. God is not abandoning or destroying them. The project is to continue with Moses leading the people to the land that God will give them. God will send an angel in front of them. The angel will lead and guide and keep a careful eye on their behaviour.

We are forever missing the mark, turning from God and going to a far country away from God. In that far country things do not go well for us. We end up in pigsties of our own making. We come to our senses and God is always ready to pick up the pieces, welcome us home and start again.

We will return and complete Moses' story later. For now, we will take a break from it and make our way through Advent as we prepare for the coming of Christmas and the birth of Jesus.

God bless you,

Tony