

American Idol

15 October 2017

Exodus 32:1-14

Last weekend, Matt Sessums from Oxford, Mississippi, in the USA, was visiting his local Walmart Supercenter when he saw something that made him look twice. At the entrances to the store he saw tables staffed by three children, who looked like they might be about ten, and two adults, who were doing a fundraiser for their church, the Oasis Church of All Nations, (or, to be more precise, its Transformations Life Center, a discipleship programme for people living with addiction). “All proceeds go toward the program to reach the hurting and broken of society,” claimed a post on the church’s currently hidden Facebook page.

But this wasn’t a cake stall, like we might have in our parish, or a sausage sizzle, like we see most Saturdays outside The Warehouse or Pak ‘N Save. This was a raffle. A raffle in which the prizes were two AR-15 military style semiautomatic rifles.¹

Now before I go any further, let me make it quite clear I have no issue with private ownership of firearms for legitimate purposes, such as hunting. And – apologies to any vegetarians or vegans whom may be present - I am very partial to wild goat, rabbit, and venison. But I can see no legitimate reason for private citizens owning weapons that are specifically designed to kill the maximum number of people in the shortest possible time.

The timing could not have been much more insensitive. Not even a week had passed since 58 people had lost their lives and about another 500 were wounded in Las Vegas in the deadliest shooting in

recent US history, in which the gunman's arsenal included a modified AR-15. The use of innocent children in peddling these weapons was especially disturbing, and I wonder how many – if any – of them pondered the fact that other children had lost mothers, fathers, and grandparents in the shooting in Las Vegas.

When the church was challenged, Associate Pastor and Director of Transformations Life Center Danny Budd responded by, amongst other things, affirming their belief in the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, which protects the right of the people to keep and bear arms.

Putting aside the fact that when this Amendment was adopted, arms were primitive weapons like muskets and not semiautomatic rifles, I was astounded that a church, which was supposed to be following the teachings of Jesus the Christ, whom the Book of Isaiah describes as the Prince of Peace, was putting its faith in military style semiautomatic rifles, instead of Jesus' fundamental commandments, which are to love God, and to love others.² And in doing so, I believe they were making idols out of guns.

But was this really all that surprising in a country where arms merchants target children with products like 'My First Rifle', a .22 calibre rifle that is available in hot pink to appeal to little girls? Or where you can buy firearms with Bible verses engraved into them, and Bibles that have been hollowed out for the purpose of concealing handguns?

In our Older Testament Lesson from the Book of Exodus, we hear the story of Aaron casting a golden calf for the Hebrew people who

demand he make new gods for them, because they have got tired of waiting for Moses to come down off the mountain for them. This is in spite of the most fundamental principles of the relationship between God and Israel was its exclusive nature; the second of the Ten Commandments instructed the Hebrews they are to have no other god before them, and not in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth, and they are not to bow down to them or worship them .³

Now I should point out that the original Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments, which appear in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy respectively, uses the word *pesel* for idol, which means a graven or carved image, usually of wood or stone. But in our story from Exodus, the word *mass ka* is used, which means an image from cast metal. But that should not be taken to mean the Hebrews have found a loophole by bowing to an image cast from molten metal instead of one carved from wood or stone, because they had a variety of words for different types of idols.

I struggle to understand their impatience. They have been led out of Egypt by Moses, and have seen great signs along the way, but now they have become impatient, and they are looking for something other than God to protect them. And this is what I consider to be the defining feature of idolatry. It wasn't so much that they bowed down to in an image, but that they had lost faith in God and they were no looking elsewhere. In other words, they had betrayed God in their hearts long before they showed any physical sign of it. And this is why I believe churches that raffle military style semiautomatic rifles stray into idolatry. For they have put their faith into an instrument of death, and in doing so have turned it into an idol.

Now at this point, you may be wondering what has this got to do with us here in Aotearoa new Zealand, where we have sensible gun control, that enables private citizens to own and use firearms for legitimate purposes, while ensuring that weapons designed for mass killing are not readily available, with the results that mass killings are very rare here.

That is valid question. But putting one's hope in weapons is but one example of idolatry. An idol is anything we put in the place of God, and therefore comes between God and ourselves. And it can be whatever we want it to be.

Some make idols out of money, material possessions, and the economy, and believe these can give them some kind of security. And they do. But only in the short term.

Others make idols out of sporting heroes and famous, musicians, media personalities, and even politicians. And while their achievements are often worthy of celebrating, their glory is also only fleeting in the bigger scheme of things.

It would seem we can make an idol out of anything, and I have even heard it suggested that fundamentalists who believe the scriptures of their faith tradition are completely literal and infallible, and should never be questioned, are making idols out of their sacred books, because they are giving them precedence over God.

So how do we avoid falling into the trap of idolatry? Earlier I spoke of Jesus' fundamental commandments, which are to love God, and to

love others. In the Older Testament, these two commandments are in completely separate books of the Law. It took Jesus to bring them together, and show that it is through loving others, whom are created in God's image, that we can demonstrate we also love God. And that is how when we give food to the hungry, refresh the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit people in prison, we do this for the Christ,⁴ and in doing so show our love for God.

If we do this, we play our part in helping usher in the coming of Gods kingdom, which the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace. We achieve this by showing Christ-like love and compassion in all that we say and all that we do to all who are created in God's image. Not by creating idols that come between God and us.

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15 October 2017

<http://theword.tk>

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/10/08/church-criticized-for-promoting-ar-15-raffle-days-after-las-vegas-massacre/?utm_term=.2e2ab22f5b4f

² Isaiah 9:6

³ Exodus 20:4-5; Deuteronomy 5:8-9

⁴ Matthew 25:34-40