

WHAT ARE IDOLS?

It is worth noting at the outset what this commandment is NOT saying. It is not about conforming to a religious belief out of fear of punishment. Faith cannot be imposed. It is an internal response on our part to God, and it must always be that. One person cannot force another to believe: not even God can do that! But there is more at work here, and the first commandment contains a quite positive message if we delve a little deeper.

In his letter, The Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis warns us of the dangers of creating false idols. Previous popes did the same, many of them through their social encyclicals. They provided a critique of the “signs of the times”, of the challenges and opportunities that they saw before them. Pope Francis has added his voice to that social tradition through various documents, speeches and addresses.

One of the concerns that he raises in this letter is the gross economic inequalities that are so prevalent in our societies. He condemns what he calls the “new idolatry of money”. “The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person! We have created new idols.” For the Holy Father, a key problem lies in our relationship with money and material objects. His predecessors warned of the dangers of excessive materialism and consumerism. Francis echoes these sentiments: “One cause of this situation is found in our relationship with money, since we calmly accept its dominion over ourselves and our societies.”

That is not to say that money in itself is a bad thing. We need income, employment, good housing, personal security, good education and healthcare, and so much more if we are to live well. We are being warned, however, not to allow money or material objects to become our only focus in life. If that happens, we risk losing sight of the

more important aspects of life and relationships. In other words, money and materialism imprison us. We create false gods, and ultimately these false gods will fail us.

TIME OUT

The growing interest in mindfulness or spirituality courses, yoga and so on should not surprise us. People are looking for space in an otherwise hectic world. They need “time out” from work and industry, and want to reflect more on life’s purpose. We must choose carefully then what we decide to worship!

This is what the first commandment is challenging us to do. We are being called to make prudent choices. We are being asked to reject false gods, not out of fear of punishment, but because we can see the false promises of these idols. This requires skill and effort. As the Irish theologian Enda McDonagh says, seeing in others the image of God “constitutes a way of life ... and is constantly in danger of being obscured by the false beauties of gods created in our own image.”

WAKE UP

Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament is a God of mercy, compassion, and fidelity. When it comes to right relationship with God we are being asked to make wholesome decisions that enhance our lives. We are being asked to mirror God’s fidelity and mercy in our own relationships, and to be authentic people of the covenant. In his book, *Commandments of Compassion*, the American theologian James Keenan remarks: “The first commandment calls us to attention: to wake up to the history of God’s intimate saving actions in our own lives. It calls us to see how God has kept us in being, through God’s own merciful hand, guiding, directing, healing, and sustaining us at every turn.” ■



Today’s readings

Jeremiah 20:7-9

Romans 12:1-2

Matthew 16:21-27

Jesus calls Peter Satan. This is because Peter is acting in exactly the same way in which Matthew presents the devil in the scene at the beginning of the gospel narrative which we usually call the Temptations.

There, the devil is trying to divert Jesus from being the Son of God in the true way which will eventually lead to the cross, but to take the easier way of becoming the kind of Messiah whom the people could easily recognise and rally around. There Jesus resists, using more or less the same expression we hear today: Go away, Satan!

In one sense, it would be easy enough for Jesus to resist the suggestions of the devil in that episode: it is clear that he (and we) know who it is that he is dealing with. Here, the text is much more subtle. The devil is acting out of malice: Peter is acting out of love and affection, but the result will be the same, the end of Jesus being truly the Son of the living God.

GOD’S WORD TODAY



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FIRST
COMMANDMENT
**YOU SHALL
HAVE NO
GODS
BEFORE ME**

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:2-3)

There are many ways in which we might consider this first commandment. Is it about the “one true religion”? About worshipping false idols? Or is it about a God of mercy and compassion? Perhaps the latter is what we may think of last – the first two being the more common interpretations. There is, in fact a lot being said in this commandment, and it has much to convey to us in today’s world also.